

Biggles

SECRET AGENT

Captain W.E. Johns



CHAPTER I

An Alarming Proposition

The Honourable Algernon Lacey rose slowly from the easy chair in which he had been reclining, yawned, and took up a

position on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, hands thrust deep into the pockets of a well-worn pair of grey flannel trousers. A frown lined his forehead as he turned his eyes to where Ginger was lounging in another chair with every indication of bored impatience. 'Where the deuce is Biggles?' he inquired in a manner which suggested that he did not expect an answer. There was more than a suspicion of irritation in his tone of voice.

'If you say that again I shall throw something at you,' answered Ginger coldly. 'How should I know?'

'He said that he would be back for lunch. He was emphatic about it.'

'He promised me that he would come to the flicks this afternoon — the new flying film at the Plaza. It's now after three o'clock. He isn't given to saying what he doesn't mean, from which we can assume, I think, that he has run into somebody or something important.'

'That's true,' agreed Algy moodily. 'I hope he hasn't run into a bus, or anything like that.'

'It wouldn't surprise me; the traffic is getting awful,' murmured Ginger in a resigned voice. 'I'm about sick of London. What did they say at the Aero Club when you rang up?'

'They said he'd been in, got his letters, and gone out again.' 'He didn't stay there for lunch?'

'Oh, well, it's no use fretting. Flicks are out of the question, anyway. He'll be along presently, I expect.'

Ginger's expectation materialized about a quarter of an hour later, when the door opened and Biggles walked in. He tossed his hat carelessly on a side table and, sinking into an easy chair, regarded Ginger gravely. 'Sorry about the flicks, Ginger,' he said in an expressionless voice. 'I couldn't get back.'

'That's all right, Biggles,' returned Ginger casually, but with a sidelong glance at Algy. '

We waited lunch for you until two o'clock. I suppose you've had some?'

Biggles pulled himself together. He looked up and smiled. 'Yes, thanks; I had an excellent lunch.'

'What did you have?'

Biggles ran his fingers through his fair hair. A puzzled expression crept over his face. '

That's funny,' he said. 'Dashed if I remember.'

'Where did you go?'

Biggles smiled again. His hazel eyes twinkled. 'As a matter of fact I had lunch in a private room in Whitehall — in an annexe of the Home Office, to be precise.'

Ginger nodded slowly, and flashed another glance at Algy. He looked back at Biggles. 'I get it,' he said knowingly. 'I don't bet, but I'd risk a small wager that Colonel Raymond was there.'

'You win,' smiled Biggles.

'Who else?'

'Sir Munstead Norton.'

'Sir who—? Who the dickens is he?'

'Permanent Assistant to the Home Secretary.'

Algy whistled softly. 'So that's it, is it?' he murmured. 'Now we know why you were looking worried when you came in. What did they want?'

Biggles took a cigarette from his case, lit it, and flicked the dead match into the grate before he replied. 'They wanted me to do a job for them,' he said quietly.

'Not being altogether a fool — I hope — I had already gathered that,' muttered Algy with asperity. 'It's the only time Raymond stands any of us lunch.'

'Come now, he's a busy man,' protested Biggles. 'To be Assistant Commissioner of Police, Special Intelligence Branch, is no blind nut.'

The point is, have you taken the job on?' asked Ginger. 'No — not yet.'

'Why not?'

Biggles drew at his cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. 'Because,' he answered, slowly and distinctly, 'it is not a job to be lightly undertaken.'

'Is that why you looked fed up when you came in?'

'Not altogether. I may as well be frank. I am worried about you two. We've always been in on these jobs together, and I know it's no use trying to keep you out. But this time it —

well — it alarms me.'

'From which I gather that it involves a certain amount of danger,' put in Algy suavely.

Biggles looked him in the eyes. 'If I merely said yes to that I should be guilty of understatement,' he said simply. 'Suicidal would probably be a better word.'

Algy frowned. 'Good heavens! That sounds pretty grim.' 'Grim it is!'

'Suppose you tell us about it?' suggested Ginger.

'That is my intention,' replied Biggles, knocking the ash off his cigarette onto the floor and putting his foot on it. 'I've only been giving myself a minute or two to settle down, to get the thing into some sort of order in my mind. I have permission to take you into my confidence, but — it's hardly necessary for me to say this, but I was asked to do so —

what is said between these four walls this afternoon must never be repeated outside them.

From that you will judge the matter to be of considerable importance. It is. The issue involves no less than the safety of the nation.'

'My word!' muttered Ginger.

Algy said nothing, but a grimace expressed his thoughts.

When Biggles continued his voice had dropped to little more than a whisper. 'Does the name Beklinder mean anything to you?' he asked.

'Professor Max Beklinder?'

Algy thought for a moment and then shook his head. 'No,' he said at last. 'I seem to recall the name vaguely, but I don't know in what connection.'

'I remember the name,' murmured Ginger, wrinkling his forehead. 'Isn't he an inventor of some sort?'

Biggles nodded. 'Professor Beklinder was the name of the man who invented Linderite, which is an explosive just about three times as powerful as anything previously discovered. That was only one of his inventions.'

'Queer name; what nationality is he?' asked Algy.

'Lucranian by birth, British by naturalization,' answered Biggles.

'Where the deuce is Lucrania?'

'You might well ask. I didn't know myself when the name cropped up. Apparently it is one of those little principalities, like Monaco and Liechtenstein, that linger on in Europe, officially independent and self-governing but in fact controlled by a powerful neighbour under whose military and economic protection they are allowed to survive. Lucrania is quite a small place, and is now almost entirely embraced by the new German frontiers.

There are narrow corridors into France and Switzerland. The language spoken is German. The country comprises a central plain surrounded almost entirely by mountains forming the natural frontiers by virtue of which it has managed to retain its so-called independence. So much for the country in which Professor Beklinder was born. Twenty years ago he was practising — successfully, I understand — as a doctor; but he got mixed up in a political intrigue and had to flee for his life. He came here, leaving his wife

— who subsequently disappeared — behind. I mention the wife for reasons which will presently become apparent.' Biggles lit another cigarette before he continued.

'I was saying,' he went on, 'that Beklinder, like most political refugees, came to England, where he soon settled down and made a name for himself as a research chemist, specializing in high-combustion explosives. Linderite put him at the top of the tree with our people, at whose invitation, about two years ago, he turned his abilities to the

production of poison gas. Not a very pleasant occupation, you may say, but while other nations devote time and money to chemical warfare we must do the same. Beklinder apparently worked hard at his new job, so hard that he came near to having a breakdown. By this time, however, he had got on the track of a poison gas so deadly that he declared that the nation which alone possessed the formula could make itself master of the world — by the destruction or terrorization of the others.

How far that is true, or an exaggeration, I am not in a position to judge; it is sufficient for me that our experts believe it. Very well. Encouraged by the departmental experts of this country he went on with his work. The secret was practically within his grasp when his health broke down. It became necessary for him to rest. And this is where the trouble started.

I must now go back a bit to refer to an incident which may, or may not, have a bearing on what was to follow. About a year ago the Professor, possibly because he was run down, had a fit — a belated fit you will think — of remorse over the unfortunate wife whom he had, by force of circumstances beyond his control, left in Lucrania. He asked the British Intelligence people to try to locate her, or ascertain her fate; and although they were only too willing to oblige, they failed to discover anything, which was in due course reported to the Professor, who made no complaint, and appeared to dismiss the matter from his mind. But the fact that he made such an inquiry has now become significant.

The Professor rested, and quickly recovered his health. He was almost fit enough to resume work when he suggested to the government that a fortnight on the Riviera was all that was needed to put him on his feet again. Naturally, our people would have preferred that he completed his formula; but he was, after all, a private individual, and it was not within their rights to refuse. To make a long story short, he went. That was nearly three months ago. He took his own car, a Morris Ten, across the Channel, with the avowed intention of following the Route

Nationale — the main highway — down to the Mediterranean. I say "avowed" intention because it now transpires that he did nothing of the sort — although how far this was due to the Professor himself we have no means of knowing. A Scotland Yard man had been detailed to watch him — for his own protection, of course — but he lost him in Paris. The story now becomes extremely interesting.

‘Three days after Beklinder disappeared in Paris a story reached England through the usual news agencies that a motorcar accident had occurred at a village named Unterhamstadt, in Lucrania. A small car bearing a British registration plate had been involved in a collision with a lorry. The driver of the car had been killed on the spot. His papers revealed that he was a British subject named—’

‘Max Beklinder,’ murmured Algy.

‘Exactly,’ continued Biggles. ‘This unfortunate man, the agencies reported, had been buried in the village churchyard. That was all. No more, no less. But you can imagine the effect of it on our people. The Home Office, the Foreign Office, the Poison Gas Experimental Station, and the Intelligence Service were thrown into a panic. It is easy to see how they were fixed. The story came through the British press in a perfectly normal manner. Max Beklinder might have been a Mr Brown, or a Mr Smith. To follow the story up too closely might have set the Lucranian government wondering what all the fuss was about — if, of course, they didn’t already know the true facts of the case. That was the thing that turned our fellows’ hair grey overnight. The Lucranian Intelligence people might know who Max Beklinder was, and what he was doing in England. On the other hand, they might not, considering that the man had been in England for nearly twenty years. Naturally, all his work had been carried on in secret, but spies have a way of ferreting out these things. In short, the government went into what we should call a flat spin. Was the thing an accident — or was it not? What was the Professor doing in Lucrania, anyway? Had he gone there of his own free will, or had he been taken there by force? These were some of the questions with which our people were faced, and the answers weren’t easy to find. Then somebody remembered the business about his wife, and a motive for his presence in Lucrania was discovered — but it didn’t help much. The situation as it stood was bad enough, but worse was to come.

About seven weeks ago, three weeks after the alleged accident, out of the blue came a piece of news that rocked Whitehall to its foundations. A British secret agent in Prenzel, the capital of Lucrania, reported that at a certain place and time he had seen Professor Beklinder driving in a motor-car with the Chief of the Lucranian Secret Police. Just reflect on that for a moment, and see what it meant — if the report was correct.

Beklinder dead was bad enough, but alive in the hands of a potential enemy power was worse — a lot worse. The accident business began to look very fishy. And things began to look fishy for this country, for

if Lucranian agents had got hold of poor old Beklinder it would only be a question of time before they forced him to divulge what he had been doing, and disclose the formula for the poison gas. The upshot of this news was to put the government into about the worst jam of its career. And that is how things stand now. The trouble is, it has been impossible to get confirmation of the British agent's report. The fellow is in London now. He admits that he doesn't know Beklinder very well, but he thought it was him. It was only a passing glance. It might have been him. But the bare possibility of it is enough to keep our people awake at nights. It comes to this. If the man in the car was Beklinder, then the accident business was all a frame-up, and there wouldn't have been any frame-up unless the Lucranian agents had known what the Professor was doing in England. And if they did know, with the Professor in their hands the formula is as good as theirs. When they get it – if they get it – it is good-bye to the British Empire. And after hearing that you won't wonder any longer why I looked worried when I came in just now.'

'But do you mean that they want you to go and investigate this?' asked Ginger incredulously.

'That's the idea.'

'But in heaven's name, why you?' cried Algy. 'Surely they have got plenty of people of their own, capable—'

Biggles held up his hand. 'Just a minute,' he said quietly. 'Our Intelligence people aren't fools. They had a man planted in the country within twenty-four hours of the information being received, with instructions to report progress every three days. Not a word has been heard of him since he crossed the frontier. A week ago they sent another man – one of the best they have, with similar instructions. He went forewarned, but that did not save him. He's gone.'

'Where were these men actually making for?' asked Algy.

Unterhamstadt – but it's unlikely that they got as far as that. Our people are of opinion that they were caught on the frontier.'

'Is there any reason to suppose that they wouldn't catch us on the frontier?' inquired Algy.

Biggles looked up. 'Yes,' he said softly.

'Wh' y?

`Because we shouldn't go in that way.'

Àh! I see,' murmured Algy. 'I begin to understand why they sent for you. They suggested that you avoided frontiers by the expedient of flying over them?'

`Precisely,' agreed Biggles. 'Our Intelligence people have established that frontier control has been so tightened up that it would be impossible for a mouse to get through without being marked down. A stranger entering the country is watched from the moment he puts foot past the Customs House.'

`Which suggests that Lucrania has something valuable to guard.'

'Our people haven't overlooked that. It all goes to confirm that the alleged accident to Beklinder was a plot to cover what really happened.'

`So what?'

`Sir Munstead Norton, advised by Colonel Raymond and Intelligence experts, is of the opinion that the only way a man could get into the country is by flying in. Regular air transport is no use, of course; airports are watched as closely as stations on the frontier.

Oh, I can see plainly enough why they got hold of me — I was just leaving the club —

and asked me to go to Unterhamstadt.'

`Why there, particularly?'

`Because it's the only loose end in this very tangled ball of string.'

`What exactly do they hope you will achieve when you get there?'

`Find out, first of all, whether the Professor is alive or dead. That, clearly, is the crux of the situation. If he is really dead, then that's the end of it.'

Ànd just how would you propose to establish that?' asked Ginger slowly, his eyes on Biggles's face.

Biggles rose from his chair and paced slowly up and down the hearthrug. He stopped abruptly. 'It would be futile to tour the country on the off-chance of seeing the Professor.

If he is, in fact, dead, it would be running an appalling risk unnecessarily.'

'Yes, but is there a way of ascertaining definitely whether he is alive or dead?' insisted Algy. 'I can't think of a way.'

'There is only one way – one way of making quite sure,' said Biggles in a curious voice.

Ginger nodded. 'I get it,' he said.

Biggles regarded him steadily. His face was set in hard lines. 'Where would you start?'

he asked shortly, almost harshly.

Ginger faltered. 'In the – the – churchyard,' he stammered.

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'That's it,' he murmured.

'You mean – you'd go to look for the tombstone?' put in Algy.

Biggles shook his head. 'It would hardly do to trust to a tombstone,' he said slowly. 'In fact, there's almost certain to be a tombstone. A grave will be there, whether it contains the Professor's body or not; I don't think we need have any doubt about that. Even if the alleged accident was a fake, Beklinder's death was officially reported to the press, so the Lucranian agents would hardly overlook the necessity for providing such an elementary piece of evidence as a grave. Frankly, I have an open mind as to what it may contain—'

'Just a minute,' interrupted Algy tersely. His eyes had opened wide, and an expression of disgust, almost of horror, had settled on his face. 'You mean—'

'I perceive that you have at last realized just what I do mean,' put in Biggles evenly. '

Finding the grave is only the first step. We

should have to open it up to see what it contained. That is the only way — to make sure; and guesswork won't do in a case like this. There's no alternative.'

Silence fell. Biggles lit another cigarette. Algy stared into the fire. Ginger gazed thoughtfully at the hearthrug, chewing the end of a dead match, while the clock on the mantelpiece ticked out the seconds and

dropped them into the past.

Is this — churchyard business — what was suggested to you?' asked Algy at last.

Biggles nodded.

'Having established that fact, one way or the other, you could then come home?'

'That would depend on what we — found.'

'You mean, if Beklinder was alive?'

'We should have to try to find him.'

Algy stared aghast. 'By heavens! That's a tall order,' he exclaimed indignantly.

If you will cast your mind back you will recall that I pointed that out in the beginning.

Well, what do we do about it?'

Ginger walked across to the bell-push.

'What are you going to do?' asked Biggles.

'Ring for some tea. The fact that Mr Beklinder has disappeared seems to be no reason why we should all starve to death. On the contrary, the statement that we're all likely to be gassed to death in the near future suggests that we should make the most of things while the going's good.'

The remark relieved the tension in the atmosphere. Biggles smiled. 'I quite agree,' he said. 'We'll have a pot of tea and then go into things a bit more closely.'

CHAPTER II

Ways And Means

W

'While the tea things were still on the table Biggles reopened the conversation. 'Assuming that we agreed to take on this proposition, let us try to work out how we should have to go about it. I gave it some

thought on the way home, and this is the way it looks to me. First of all, let us be under no delusions as to the risks; if we're caught, or if our mission is so much as suspected, we shall be — to use the popular expression — bumped off. In no circumstances whatever would the British government come to our assistance; on the contrary, they would, in accordance with international tradition in such matters, disclaim all knowledge of us. It would be impossible for them to do anything else. I don't know how you feel about it, but my own reaction to all this is something like relief, because it permits no introduction of half measures. If we go, we go the whole hog all the time. The question of mitigating circumstances would not arise. Knowing that failure could have only one ending we should go to any lengths — any lengths — to prevent it. In other words, knowing that our opponents would not hesitate to kill us, I should not hesitate to proceed on the same principle.

‘Now about getting there. As I see it, the machine required would be a four-seater with manoeuvrability as the first consideration. We shouldn't need anything of outstanding performance. Something stable, easy to fly — bearing in mind that the actual flying would be done at night — something that could be put down in a small field, on rough ground, is what we should want. That means something light, with wheel brakes to pull up quickly, and a wide landing chassis to prevent the machine turning over if a wheel hit an obstruction.’

‘Something like the Wessex "Student"?’ suggested Ginger.

‘That's the machine I had in mind,’ declared Biggles. ‘All right. Let us imagine that we are starting. Obviously we couldn't operate from England. It's too far away. The ideal base would be a small aerodrome in north-eastern France. At the moment we are good friends with France, so Colonel Raymond could probably arrange that. Right! We are now at the aerodrome. We go over into enemy country on the first fine Saturday night —

and here we strike the first snag; there's no way round it that I can see. There can be no question of landing in Lucrania except in the case of extreme emergency, because while it's possible to get down without making a noise, it's unfortunately impossible for a machine to take off except under full throttle, and you know what that means. We daren't risk being heard. With the state of vigilance the country is in, one rumour of a machine taking off at night would make further operations impossible. No! There's only one way.

It means taking the machine up to twenty thousand feet outside the

frontier and gliding over. Some one will have to stay in the machine; the other two will go down by parachute. The machine, still gliding, will then go back across the frontier without having opened its engine inside Lucrania

Algy, I should ask you to fly the machine. Ginger and I would go down into what we may regard as enemy country.'

Algy nodded. 'That's all right with me,' he said lightly.

It's the getting out that is likely to worry us,' continued Biggles. And this is where we shall have to do some serious thinking. It means working to a time-table. You would have to glide over at prearranged times and watch for signals. Fortunately, we all know the Morse code, so in emergency those on the ground could flash a message to the machine. That may not be necessary, though. Coloured lights are simpler. For example, a red light would mean "keep away"; a green light would be "come down and fetch us." Do you follow?'

'Yes, that's quite straightforward,' agreed Algy.

'Good! Now for the landing-ground. In my pocket I have a tracing of a large-scale map of the Unterhamstadt district. I got it at the Foreign Office. There isn't a proper aerodrome near the village — nor would it be desirable to work too close, anyway. The village itself lies in a valley with wooded hills on either side. Incidentally, the churchyard is about a quarter of a mile from the centre of the village. Apart from the church, there happens to be a conspicuous landmark near by — Unterhamstadt Castle. It's only a ruin of crumbling towers and walls, so I understand, but it stands on a knoll and rises above the surrounding trees. It seems to be one of those romantic-sounding old places that inspired Grimm's fairy tales. Lucrania and Bohemia are full of them — relics of the days when knights were bold and slew stray dragons to please beautiful princesses. I fancy we shall have something far more dangerous than dragons to contend with.

'Beyond the hills the country is open, most of it under cultivation. There are several places where a machine could get down

at a pinch, but four miles due north there's a large grazing area which would suit our purpose admirably. Ginger and I would aim to hit that when we go over with our "

brollies". Another point arises here. We can't float about Lucrania without any luggage.

We should have to adopt the role of tourists — this being, as far as I can see, the only excuse for an Englishman to visit the country.'

'You mean — you wouldn't actually hide up?' asked Ginger.

I don't see how we could. We may be there for some time, and we've got to eat. Sooner or later somebody would be bound to see us, and a report of two strangers slinking about in the woods wouldn't make our task any easier. This is my idea, and you'll see the reason for it presently. Bear in mind that I have been into this pretty closely with the Foreign Office people, who were able to give me a lot of useful information. Ginger and I would arrive at Unterhamstadt ostensibly as tourists. Having disposed of our parachutes we should, of course, arrive on foot. Now tourists seldom walk about Lucrania, or anywhere else in Europe for that matter, carrying their own suitcases. When they have suitcases they arrive at the railway station, and either drive or walk to their hotel, in which case the hotel porter fetches the luggage. Alternatively, they arrive at a place by motor-car. I say alternatively, but there is, in fact, another fairly common way of travelling nowadays when a lot of people are going abroad on the cheap. They walk, carrying their kit in a rucksack. If, therefore, Ginger and I arrive at the hotel in Unterhamstadt in shorts or flannel bags, carrying rucksacks, we should, I think, pass for a type of tourist which is becoming increasingly common on the Continent. As you know, I speak German fairly well, which should be a great help.'

'You said the hotel,' put in Algy.

'Yes, there's only one, but it is a good one. I gather that it is one of those big old coaching stations which still hang on in France and Germany. I believe a number of tourists use it, artists, plant hunters, hikers, and so on. We can be artists.'

I see — go on.'

'Very well. Ginger and I arrive at the hotel. Assuming that our arrival passes without comment, we shall have exactly seven days to do our job and get out of it.'

'Why seven days?'

'When we arrive we shall have to register, which reminds me, we shall have to forge frontier control stamps on our passports for the hotel proprietor's benefit. As you know, one has to register everywhere in Europe. The hotel proprietor checks the registration forms with passports. In Lucrania, every seven days — every Saturday,

to be precise —

the forms are sent to police headquarters. I suspect that when the forms bearing the names of two Englishmen are received at headquarters the police will be along hot-foot.

You see, quite apart from the fact that they'll want to have a look at us anyway, their anxiety will be stimulated when they discover — as they certainly will — that there are no corresponding entries in the frontier books. Naturally, they will want to know how we got into the country, and that's a question we should not be able to answer. And that, I may say, is looking at the thing in the best possible light. In other words, that is what we might reasonably suppose would happen were the circumstances merely normal.

Unfortunately a factor arises here which will make our task much more hazardous, although to some extent it cuts both ways. The circumstances will not be normal.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Algy.

Biggles smiled, a curious smile in which there was little mirth. 'You will remember that when I mentioned the incident of Beklinder being seen by a British agent in Prenzel, he was accompanied by the Lucranian Chief of Secret Police.'

'Yes?'

'There is nothing surprising in the fact that this official is a German, Germany being the country most concerned with the welfare or otherwise of Lucrania. Many of the leading civil and military appointments are held by Germans.'

'Go on. You're not going to tell me that we know him?'

'We do. By a curious chance which at first sight may seem remarkable, but which, when all the circumstances are considered, becomes a feasible likelihood, this gentleman happens to be one whose path we seem destined to cross — at least, while we both make a business of espionage. I mean Erich von Stalhein.'

There was a moment of profound silence. Then Ginger sprang to his feet. 'What?'

Algy sat bolt upright in his chair. His eyes narrowed. 'That oily-tongued swine?' he exclaimed in a hard voice.

Biggles made a deprecatory gesture. 'You choose your words carelessly, Algy,' he protested. 'There is nothing oily about von Stalhein. Acid-tongued, if you like. And why a swine? Be fair. The man serves his country as we try to serve ours. Apart from which he is the most efficient German I have ever met. Had he been in command of German Intelligence in the Near East during the last war I should now be a handful of mouldering earth under the desert sand. He knew I was a fake — but his boss didn't believe him. He was brilliant, and only I know how lucky I was to beat him. We ran into him again in that gold racket. Again it was touch and go. At the finish the cards fell in our favour. No, von Stalhein is a gentleman at heart. If his methods seem harsh, remember that he is a German, and was trained in a school where ruthlessness is essential to success.

Personally, I have a sneaking regard for him; and, if we knew the truth, he probably feels the same about us. That would not prevent him from killing us, nor us him, if circumstances demanded it. But I wouldn't call a man a swine on that account. Now let us get back to the point. Von Stalhein knows us by sight. We also know him — that is what I meant when I said that it cuts both ways. The fact that he is where he is makes our task more difficult. There is just a chance that he, personally, may not see the hotel registration forms when they are sent in from Unterhamstadt, but if he does — well, I need say no more. If we arrive at the hotel on Sunday morning those forms should not reach police headquarters until the following Saturday afternoon. Now you know what I meant when I said that we have seven days to do the job and get out.'

'Why not use false names?' suggested Ginger.

Biggles shook his head. 'That would only complicate matters,' he answered. 'It would mean false passports.'

'That could be arranged, too.'

'No doubt; but one slip and we shouldn't have a leg to stand on. We might arouse suspicion where none existed. After all, if our plan goes right, we might be tourists. But if we are found to be carrying dud passports we might as well admit that we are spies.

Our records are in the German archives, don't forget. They've probably got our photographs filed there, too.'

'Couldn't we disguise ourselves?' offered Ginger.

'I'm all against this melodrama stuff,' replied Biggles emphatically.

'Unless a disguise is absolutely perfect, it is worse than useless. We're not experts at that sort of thing. I should probably forget my wig and leave it on the dressing table, or drop my false whiskers into the soup, or something equally daft. My feeling is that all these tricks are out of date. They belong to spy books of the last generation. My principle is, and always has been, simplicity. It has worked so far, and I don't feel inclined at this juncture to switch on to cheap detective stuff. Let us make a straight bid for what we are after. We ought to have a clear week to do the job. If we haven't done it by then, the chances are that we never shall do it.'

'That's O.K. by me,' agreed Ginger.

'What happens next?' inquired Algy.

'When we arrive in the country we shall have to take certain equipment, which we must dispose of before arriving at the hotel,' went on Biggles. 'As we agreed just now, after that our immediate objective would be the churchyard. If we are lucky enough, or clever enough, to discover what the grave contains, the first vital step would be to report to London. If we can do that, no matter what happens to us we shall have done a good job.'

We may be able to get out of the country and report in person, but, on the other hand, a hundred things might happen to prevent us from doing that. I propose, therefore, to take a Foreign Office pigeon. Once it is released with a message it will be a lot harder to catch it than us.'

Algy nodded thoughtfully. 'That's a good idea,' he agreed. 'But tell me — how do you propose getting into this grave?'

'I'm coming to that,' replied Biggles. 'Obviously, we shall need tools — a couple of spades would probably do, since the earth will have been newly turned.'

'But you can't take things like spades with you. You'll be cluttered up quite enough with your rucksacks and pigeon basket for safe parachute work.'

'We shall have to put them on a special parachute and throw it overboard at the same time as we ourselves jump.'

'Yes, that sounds the only way.'

'Having collected the spades, we hide them, with the pigeon basket, in

the woods, if possible somewhere near the churchyard. We then proceed to the hotel. After that we shall have to take our chance.'

'Do you imagine that you can get into a churchyard and dig up a grave without leaving signs of what has happened?' Algy's tone of voice was frankly sceptical.

'Surely that depends on where the grave is?' returned Biggles without hesitation, which suggested that he had not overlooked the point. 'If the grave is in a conspicuous place, say near the porch, obviously any interference would be noticed by people passing by.

But if it is in a remote corner, which seems more likely, nobody may go near it for some time; in which case, as it is the spring of the year, the herbage will soon overgrow any mess we make. That is one of the things we have got to take a chance on. But even if the grave were right by the church door we should have to investigate it, otherwise we might as well stay at home. To start looking haphazardly for the Professor, even in a small country like Lucrania, would make looking for a needle in a haystack child's play by comparison; and that is assuming he's alive.'

'That's true enough.'

'Well, that's the story, and the broad basis of the only practicable scheme the Intelligence experts, in conjunction with myself, can work out. The only saving grace about it is, money is no object. The security of the nation is at stake, and we can spend as much as we like on equipment, bribes, or anything else. The only question that remains to be answered is — do we take it on? We

are under no compulsion to do so, nor any obligation. The risks being what they are, and the government fully aware of them, it is essentially a volunteer show. But once started there's no going back. Now, how do you feel about it? Your lives are your own; they are the only ones you're likely to have this side of eternity so they are not to be thrown away lightly. You've risked them before, I know, more than once, and so have I; but maybe we'

ve all been lucky, and luck is a mistress not to be relied upon. We shall need her to smile on us this journey, make no mistake about that. Never before has the peril been so real, so deadly, so cold-blooded, from the very outset. If we go, we go with our eyes open. If you'd rather not, don't hesitate to say so. Now, what about it?'

'We've never turned down a job yet, and considering what is at stake,

this strikes me as being the wrong time to start jibbing,' said Algy slowly.

Biggles turned to Ginger. 'What about you, laddie?'

'I'd as soon be bumped off trying to do something useful as flattened out by a lunatic in a motor-car while trying to cross the road in this bedlam of a city,' replied Ginger carelessly.

'Good enough. Then that settles that. You'd better make yourselves familiar with this.'

Biggles took a photograph from his breast pocket and laid it on the table. 'That is a portrait of Professor Beklinder,' he said. 'It's an interesting face; with that high forehead and long hair. He looks more like a musician than a chemist, doesn't he? Get his face fixed in your memory, because we cannot take the photograph with us. I'll let Raymond know we're going.' Biggles reached for the telephone.

CHAPTER III

A Drop In The Dark

Cell, ell, what do you think of it?' It was Algy who spoke, addressing Biggles, who, hands in his pockets, was

gazing reflectively at a few wisps of filmy cloud that appeared to be drawn slowly across a starlit sky by an unseen hand.

'I think it's all right,' returned Biggles after a moment's hesitation. The weather report is good, anyway. If we don't go tonight it will mean waiting another week. I think we'll get along. Are you feeling all right, Ginger?'

'As right as rain,' answered Ginger carelessly.

'All right, then; let's go,' murmured Biggles, and turning, walked towards where the black silhouette of a hangar rose sharp and clear against the sky.

Ten days had elapsed since their momentous decision to enter Lucrania in an endeavour to ascertain the truth concerning Professor Beklinder's mysterious disappearance. They had been busy days, for there was much to arrange, and Biggles had been meticulous in his preparations. The others had never seen him pay so much attention to even the minutest details. 'We can't afford to take one single risk that

can be reduced or discounted by ourselves before we start,' was all he had said when Algy had once questioned his care over a matter of such triviality that it hardly seemed worth troubling about.

There had been no difficulty in getting the machine they required, a Wessex 'Student'.

The government had merely commandeered a new one that had just been built to the order of a private individual. What the owner thought of this they did not know, for they had heard no more about it. A special branch of the Foreign Office had attended to its own part of the proceedings, the preparation of papers, passports, and permission to use an aerodrome in France from which operations could be conducted without fear of awkward questions being asked by the local authorities. It was only a small place, no more than an emergency landing-ground for east-bound air liners, but it suited their purpose well enough. Here they had arrived two days previously, and after making final arrangements they had nothing more to do than wait, with some anxiety on account of the weather, the time for departure. Now the hour had arrived. The weather was fair. It might have been better, but it could have been much worse.

Just before they reached the hangar Biggles stopped and turned to Algy. 'There's just one other thing,' he said in a low voice. 'I haven't mentioned it before, and – well, perhaps there's really no need to mention it now. Maybe I'm a bit keyed up. It's about that ground engineer here – Brogart.'

'What about him?'

'Nothing really tangible – but—'

'I thought he was a nice chap.'

'He may be. But be careful. I wouldn't trust him too far. Perhaps he's just one of those cheerful busybodies who is a nosey-parker without knowing it, or without meaning any harm, but it has

struck me that he is very interested in us. I am going on what I know of the French temperament. Mechanics, particularly French mechanics, don't stick around on their jobs when they are off duty and when there is an estaminet handy. I know Brogart is a cheerful fellow, very willing and obliging and all that, but I've noticed that he's always about when we are. Once I caught him looking through the side window of our machine.

I admit that may have been natural curiosity because the door was locked. He may be all that he pretends to be. On the other hand, he may not. We don't know, and we're not likely to find out. He may be an interested — er — spectator, acting on behalf of the French government. He might even be a British agent. He might be anything. But my advice to you is to keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. If he turns up here tonight

— seven o'clock on a Saturday night, when his pals are sipping vermouth in the local pub

— I shall say that he is unusually industrious.'

'I'll keep an eye on him, but I think you're unduly suspicious,' opined Algy.

'It's better to be suspicious now than sorry later,' returned Biggles curtly. 'Ginger, walk down to the end of the shed and watch the road while Algy and I get the machine out.'

Ò.K.' Ginger walked briskly away on his errand.

Between them, Biggles and Algy folded back the hangar doors and pulled the 'Student'

out into the open. They had just closed the doors when Ginger hurried up.

'There's somebody coming,' he said in a low voice. 'I think it's Brogart.'

Biggles muttered something under his breath. 'All right. We can't put the machine back.

Confound the fellow.'

A moment later the French mechanic came round the corner of the hangar. He stopped abruptly when he saw the machine, and the motionless figures awaiting him. Then he came on again.

'Bon soir, messieurs,' he cried cheerfully. 'You make the night flight — yes?'

'Yes, we're going to visit some friends,' growled Biggles.

Ah, you go to Paris — my lovely Paris? Its cafés! And the girls! Ha!

`Perhaps,' returned Biggles coldly.

The Frenchman was not abashed by Biggles's manner. 'I thought I could help to make the start. Voila!'

`Why? What made you think we were likely to fly tonight?' inquired Biggles evenly.

The mechanic hesitated for an almost imperceptible fraction of a second. Then he shrugged his shoulders. 'I see you come this way, so I say, voila, they will fly. That is the good sense, yes?'

`Your sense is so good that it almost amounts to telepathy,' murmured Biggles.

`Telepathy? What is zis?'

`Never mind It's all right, Brogart. We shan't need any help. We'll see you later.'

The Frenchman lit a cigarette. 'Bien,' he exclaimed, flicking the dead match aside. 'You are mechanics as well as pilots? Bon. Zat is good. You send for me if something is wanted. I tink I will take a cognac with my leetle girl at the Cochon Rouge. Au revoir, messieurs.' The mechanic bowed, raised his beret, and humming softly to himself, walked away in the direction from which he had come.

As he rounded the corner of the hangar Biggles caught Ginger by the arm. 'After him,' he breathed. 'Watch where he goes — but don't let him see you. Don't leave the aerodrome.'



Brogart leaves the aerodrome.

Algy looked at Biggles. 'Well?' he grunted.

'Let's get started up. We can't waste any more time.' 'Can he possibly know what we're doing?'

Of course not. There isn't the remotest chance of that. But all the same I'd bet my life he knows that we're up to something unusual, and he would like to know what it is. Whether that's for his own private

information, or for somebody else who is interested, we don't know and we're not likely to. You'll have to be careful with that fellow, Algy,' Biggles concluded, as he unlocked the door of the machine, and after a quick look round to see that all their equipment was inside, turned again to wait for Ginger.

He returned in about five minutes. 'He's gone,' he said.

'Are you sure?'

'Pretty sure. I watched him walk down the road. He was still walking when I last saw him, although he looked back once or twice as if he thought he might be followed.'

'Good! Then let's get away,' announced Biggles. 'Be careful how you get into that parachute, Ginger.'

In a few minutes they were ready, for they had discussed this moment so often that they were all word-perfect in the parts they were to play. They took their places, Algy at the joystick, Biggles beside him with a map on his knees, and Ginger in the tiny cabin behind.

Algy reached for the self-starter, and the engine caught immediately, for it had been tuned up to as near perfection as it is possible for a piece of machinery to be. For five minutes they sat still, nobody speaking, while the engine ticked over with the precision of a well-oiled sewing-machine as it warmed up.

'All right,' said Biggles at last. 'Let her go.'

Instantly the 'Student' began to move forward. Algy took it well out into the aerodrome before turning into the slight breeze; he regarded the skyline intently for a moment; then the engine roared as he slid the throttle open and the 'Student'

sped across the darkened aerodrome towards the distant boundary. For a few seconds the machine quivered as its wheels raced over the rough turf; then the vibration ceased abruptly and it climbed steeply into the night sky. For a thousand feet Algy held the machine straight; then, still climbing, he turned slowly until the 'Student' was on its compass course for their destination.

For half an hour nobody spoke. There was nothing to say, for every possible contingency had been discussed on the ground. They had climbed to 18,000 feet and were still climbing.

Ginger stared out of the window; not that there was much to see, for the earth was no more than a vague black shadow at the bottom of an immense void, dotted with innumerable pinpoints of light, sometimes in clusters and sometimes isolated, marking the position of villages and lonely dwellings. Above and around the stars shone hard and clear from a cloudless sky.

Algy looked from the watch on his instrument board to Biggles's face. His eyes held a question.

Biggles nodded. 'Better ease her,' he said. 'We're nearing the frontier.'

As if in answer the noise of the engine faded to a soft purr. The nose of the machine tilted down.

'You're sure we're all right?' asked Algy.

'Yes, I'm watching it. See the river ahead? Turn right and follow it when you get to it.'

Algy nodded, throttled right back and began a long steady glide.

Another quarter of an hour passed. The 'Student', moving at little more than stalling speed through a lonely world of its own, was down to 14,000

feet and still losing height slowly.

Biggles stared long and intently at the ground. 'I can see the village,' he said. 'At least, I think those are the lights, over on the right. Come round to the left a little, to bring us over the plain.' Then, as the nose of the machine crept round, 'Hold her,' he called. 'You'll do. Keep her there. Are you ready, Ginger?'

'Ay, ay, sir.'

'Right! Give me five seconds to get clear after I jump.' Biggles picked up a large bundle from the floor of the cabin, opened the door and crept carefully out on to the port wing.

The bundle disappeared into the void. Three seconds later he followed it, the machine rocking as he slid off the trailing edge of the wing. He disappeared from sight instantly.

Ginger, who was already on his feet, immediately crept out on to the wing. 'I'd as soon be kicked in the teeth as jump into that hole,' he

growled into Algy's ear as he passed him.

Closing the door behind him, he gripped the rip ring firmly in his right hand and took a deep breath. Then he launched himself into the void.

There was no sensation of falling, although the wind was bitterly cold as it beat against his face. One — two — three, he counted and tugged at the ring. An instant later the jerk of his harness told him that the parachute had opened; looking up he could see it billowing above him like a great black cloud. He looked around. There was no sign of Biggles; the sky was so clear that he thought he ought to be able to see him, although he knew well enough how difficult it is to see a moving body in the air when it is dark.

Everything was still — silent. The silence was uncanny. He could not even hear the still-gliding 'Student', now on its way back to France. A horrible feeling began to creep over him that he was not falling at all, but was suspended in space from some invisible object. He whistled, hoping that Biggles might hear, but there was no reply. He looked down. For the most part the earth was wrapped in profound gloom, but the tiny cluster of lights that marked the village of Unterhamstadt gleamed more brightly.

Presently he could see vaguely the shape of the hills surrounding them. On the crest of one there appeared to be a clearing, grey in the dim light. He remembered the castle of which Biggles had spoken and stared at it with interest. He was about to turn his eyes away when a light flashed from the edge of the pile. So quickly did it appear and disappear that he found himself wondering if he had really seen a light. He recalled what Biggles had said about the place being a ruin. However, he dismissed the matter from his mind, for he knew he must be nearing the ground and gave his entire attention to the business of landing; for when one is falling at several feet a second it is an easy matter to sprain an ankle; and such a mishap in the circumstances would be in the nature of a disaster.

The end came suddenly. The ground seemed to rush up to meet him, and he was thankful to see that he was clear of obstructions. He braced himself for the shock of landing; hardly had he done so than he was on the ground, with the soft silk burying him under its voluminous folds.

He rolled clear, slipped off his harness and looked around anxiously. Seeing nothing, he whistled softly, and drew a deep breath of relief when it was answered from a short distance away. Satisfied that

everything so far had gone according to plan he began rolling up his parachute; by the time he had finished Biggles was standing beside him, half buried under his burden

of parachute, rucksack, pigeon basket, and digging implements, also with their parachute attached.

'Everything all right?' inquired Biggles.

'Yes, we don't seem to have broken anything,' Ginger told him.

'Good! Then let's get rid of this junk. There's the wood, over there. The village is on the other side of the hill.'

Ginger gathered the unwieldy bundle of his parachute under his arm and set off at Biggles's side across the open ground towards the place where they had decided to conceal their questionable burdens.

They moved quickly but quietly, although there appeared to be nothing to fear. Not a sound broke the silence. Five minutes' sharp walking brought them to the edge of the wood. It was pitch dark under the pines, but Biggles groped his way inside. Then he took out his flashlight, and finding a comparatively level spot, dropped his burden. 'It feels like sandy soil under foot,' he said quietly. 'I hoped it would be. It will be easy to dig,' he went on, cutting the digging utensils clear of their parachute, and setting about the task of making a hole large enough to bury them in.

Even though the ground was soft it took them the best part of half an hour to finish the job to their satisfaction. The digging tools, a spade and a small military entrenching tool with a pick at one end, were laid on the top of the pile, and the last covering of earth was put on by hand, the whole site of the excavation finally being carefully smoothed over and strewn with pine needles. It took Biggles a few minutes to find a satisfactory place to hide the pigeon basket, for this, of course, could not be buried. In the end he decided to put it under a thick holly bush, and cover it lightly with leaves.

'Thank goodness that's done,' he murmured as he rejoined Ginger. 'Now for the village.'

We've a good two miles to go, I reckon. We had better get on the road; we can reach it by keeping to the edge of the wood. Incidentally, we had better mark this spot down from the outside; we should look a pair of fools if we couldn't find the place again.'

Ginger agreed, so after memorizing the place as well as they could in the starlight, they set off along the edge of the wood towards the road. As they walked Biggles submitted Ginger to a sort of catechism of questions, questions such as how long they had been in the country, where they had come from, their last place of call, their business, when they were returning, and the like, for it was part of their programme that their stories should coincide should they ever be questioned separately.

'We might have brought a couple of good ash walking-sticks with us,' remarked Biggles as they neared the village. 'Most hikers carry sticks. As a matter of fact, I did think of it before we started, but we were already so cluttered up that I didn't like adding any more to our kit. No matter; we shall probably be able to buy a couple here. This looks like the beginning of the village, and where our troubles begin — if we are going to have any. It may all turn out to be a lot easier than we think. Anyway, whatever happens, we can console ourselves that we have left as little as possible to chance.'

By this time they had reached the village, which, in the wan light of a newly risen moon, they saw was little more than a single street of old houses, most of them half-timbered, with overhanging eaves and numerous gables, in typical central-European medieval style. Some of the timbering was quaint in design, some almost fantastic; and as many of the houses had

either been built out of true, or had warped under the heavy hand of time, the effect was what Ginger described, aptly, as Christmas-cardish.

'I should say that in the ordinary way this is a nice old place,' murmured Biggles appreciatively. 'It's got a pleasant old-world air — the real thing, not imitation, as one so often sees at home. Things have probably changed very little here during the past five hundred years. I've seen villages in Bavaria and Bohemia very much like it. Left alone, there's nothing wrong with the people, but with the political stew Europe is in they are probably getting a bit sullen, although they have to take care not to show it. However, we shall see. I — hold hard a minute.'

Biggles had caught Ginger by the arm and drawn him back into the black shadow of a dilapidated barn. 'Take a look at that,' he whispered, indicating a low-fronted tumble-down house that stood by itself on the opposite side of the road. Several windows had been broken.

`What do you mean — the broken windows?' asked Ginger quietly.

`Partly, but look what is written on the door.'

Peering forward, Ginger could just make out the word 'Jude' crudely chalked across the entrance. 'What does that mean?' he asked.

`The owner of the place is a Jew. Apparently this is one of the places under the influence of anti-Jewish propaganda. He's evidently a tradesman. That's his name over the door.

What is it — Simon Kretzner? Beerdigungs-Institut. By Jove! He's the local undertaker. I wonder how much he knows about this business — or if he knows anything. I wonder if we could find out.'

`How could we do that?'

`There's only one way, and that is by asking. It's risky, but if it came off it might save us a lot of trouble.'

Is there anybody there? I don't see a light.'

`That looks like a workshop in front. There might be a light at the back. Let's go and look.'

After a quick glance up and down the road to make sure there was nobody about, they crossed it, and lifting aside a broken wicket gate that gave access to a narrow path, they walked quietly to the end of the house and looked round.

The reflection of a feeble orange light glowed on an overgrown tangle of bushes that had encroached far into what had once been a kitchen garden. But even as they looked the light went out, leaving the bushes to the bluey-grey moonlight.

`He heard us. We've scared him,' whispered Ginger.

`Then he must have pretty sharp ears — unless he was on the watch,' muttered Biggles. '

I'm going to knock on the front door. Behave naturally if he answers it. I'll do the talking'

Retracing their steps down the path to the front door, Biggles rapped sharply on it with his knuckles.

CHAPTER IV

The Jew Of Unterhamstadt

Possibly on account of the fact that the house was in darkness, or because of its forlorn appearance, the knock had an

eerie, almost sinister sound, altogether unlike the announcement of the arrival of an expected guest. It seemed to break sharply into an attentive silence, as if it were awaited, yet feared. As the sound died away to a hush more profound on account of its having been broken, the two airmen listened intently for a reply. But they listened in vain. All remained as silent as the grave.

'I have a feeling that there's something wrong about this place,' muttered Ginger, glancing around apprehensively.

'Nonsense,' retorted Biggles impatiently. 'Why should there be? You're getting nervous.'

'Somebody is at home; we know that because we saw the light. Evidently they think we're footpads.' He knocked again, more loudly this time.

The knock was answered instantly by a faint cry from within, a curious whimpering sound that might have been made by an animal.

'That's got somebody on the move, anyway,' murmured Biggles, as there came a soft shuffling noise from behind the door, which, after a rattling of chains and scraping of bolts, was opened a few

inches. Who had opened it was not evident, however, for the room beyond was in darkness.

'tauten Abend,' said Biggles, in a cheerful tone, calculated to allay suspicion if in fact it existed. Continuing in the same language he went on, 'We are Englishmen and strangers to this place. Is this the village of Unterhamstadt?'

For a brief moment there was no reply; only a long indrawn breath, almost a shudder, as of infinite relief. Ja, ja, mein Herren,' came a thin, quavering voice. The door started to close again, but Biggles put his foot against it. 'Have you any walking-sticks for sale?' he inquired.

The voice replied in the negative.

'May we come in and rest for a minute or two?' persisted Biggles. 'We have come far, and would like to ask some questions about accommodation in the village.'

This request did not immediately produce an answer. It was as if the man behind the door suspected that it was only an excuse to gain admittance — as indeed it was.

'You need have no fear of us,' continued Biggles, in a low voice. 'We are English travellers — and friends of the Jews.' Biggles did little more than whisper the last few words.

The door was opened slowly and the voice invited them to enter.

With Ginger following, Biggles stepped across the threshold. Standing in utter darkness, they still could not see the man whose privacy they had invaded, and thus they stood while the door was closed, shutting out even the feeble moonlight. Ginger was conscious of a pricking sensation down the spine as there came again the curious shuffling sound, accompanied by a low muttering. He started violently as, with a scratching noise, amplified no doubt by the darkness, a match flared up disclosing the scene, and, for the first time, their host, who was in the act of lighting a cheap tallow candle from the match which he had struck.

Ginger regarded with a mixture of disgust and sympathy an old man whose back was bent by years, by labour, or by suffering, or, perhaps, by a combination of all three. His hair, had it been clean, would have been white; long and tangled, it hung far down over the back of his collarless neck, and down his cheeks until it became part of the unkempt beard that concealed the lower part of his face. His old-fashioned jacket and shapeless trousers, once black, were green with age, and dirty beyond description, as were his hands and that part of his face which was not covered with hair. His movements were slow and uncertain; indeed, his fingers trembled to such an extent that it was only with difficulty that he brought the wick of the candle and the flame of the match together.

Biggles caught Ginger's eyes. 'Observe what persecution and the fear of death does to a man in time,' he said softly, in English. 'Poor devil. He is just an animated piece of terror.' Then, more loudly, he went on in German, 'Do not worry about us, Father. You have nothing to fear.'

'I have no money here — none,' said the old Jew, in a dull, heavy voice, raising his hands, palms outwards in a characteristic gesture of

hopelessness, and regarding his visitors with anxiety and suspicion.

Biggles smiled reassuringly. 'We have more than we need,' he said gently. 'We may even have some to spare,' he added significantly.

The old man's deep-set eyes regarded Biggles broodingly. 'So,'

he breathed. 'It would be better for me — and for you — if we did not talk here. Follow me.' Turning, he led the way into a small room at the rear. It was filthy beyond description. A heavy foetid smell hung on the air, and judging from the heaped-up rags on a couch that occupied one side of the room, it was plain that the old man lived in it.

Indicating a wooden bench, he invited his visitors to be seated; then, after standing the candle on a table littered with dirty crocks, he himself sank down on the rag-covered bed.

'What can I do for you?' he asked nervously, looking from one to the other. 'You were not wise to come here.'

'Why not?' asked Biggles.

'I am a Jew.'

'Do they treat Jews so badly?'

'You have seen,' said the old man simply.

'Why do you stay here and suffer?'

'How can I go? I have no money — none.' The old man's eyes darted from door to window, and back again to his visitors. 'They have had it all,' he said softly, but there was a world of hate behind his tremulous voice.

'Have you anywhere to go — if you had money?' inquired Biggles.

'I have a married daughter in Switzerland. Fortunately she left before the trouble began.'

'And if you had — shall we say — two thousand marks, you could join her — yes?'

Surprise joined the smouldering fear in the old man's eyes. 'Where is there so much money?' he scoffed.

'I can give you that — and more — if you can furnish me with the

information I seek,'

said Biggles deliberately, his eyes squarely meeting those of the Jew.

Again there was a short silence. Again the old man's eyes flashed from door to window, almost, it seemed, from very habit. 'What is it you want to know?' he asked at last.

Biggles had gone too far now to dissemble. He decided there and then to take the downright course. 'Not long ago a learned doctor was injured here in a motor-car accident, so that he died,' he murmured, quietly but distinctly. And even as he spoke he saw the old man's flabby muscles stiffen.

The Jew crouched back, an arm over his face as if he feared a blow. 'No!' he gasped. 'No

– not that!' His tongue licked his lips as again his eyes darted from door to window. 'No!'

he panted, his voice breaking into a whimper.

Biggles's face hardened. His manner became cold and direct. 'Listen, old man,' he said in a terse whisper, 'I will pay you to tell me what you know.'

'I know nothing.'

Biggles took out his wallet and slowly counted out twenty-five hundred-mark notes. 'Will those restore your memory?' he asked grimly. 'With those, tomorrow you could leave this place for ever. Now tell me. Did you bury the doctor's body?'

The Jew stared at the notes as if they fascinated him. 'No,' he insisted.

'But you are the undertaker here.'

'Yes, but it was not I. It was—' The man broke off abruptly, as if he realized that he was saying too much.

'Who was it?' Biggles's voice was as cold and hard as cracking ice.

'My son. He, too, is of my trade. His workshop is nearer the middle of the village.'

'Is he there now?'

`No.'

`Where is he?'

`Gone.'

`Gone? Gone where?'

`They took him away — afterwards.'

Ì see,' said Biggles slowly. 'Did you see him — afterwards?' `No'

`Don't lie.'

The old man quivered. 'I do not — lie.'

`Then if you did not see him how did you know about this?' asked Biggles sharply.

`He told his wife that night. The next day they took him away. She told me,' gasped the old man, his eyes on Biggles's face. It was as if Biggles was dragging the information out of him against his will.

`That night? What night?' demanded Biggles.

The Jew shook with terror. His eyes were never still, and the trembling of his hands was such that he had to grip the bed to steady them.

Biggles began picking up the notes. 'I am wasting my time,' he said grimly. Will you tell me what I want to know or shall I pursue my inquiries elsewhere?'

The funeral director's agitation was pitiful to behold. 'I will tell you,' he gasped at last, holding out his hand for the notes.

But Biggles withdrew them. 'Tell me first and they shall be yours,' he promised.

The old man moistened his lips with his tongue. 'I will tell you everything,' he said desperately. He was nearly inarticulate with terror, and Ginger marvelled that a man could be reduced to such a lamentable condition.

Àfter the accident the man was brought here, to the Kleishausen, which is the big hotel—'

`Where did the accident happen?' interrupted Biggles. Ah! That I do not know.'

`Very well, go on.'

It was this way. My son was just sitting down to his supper when two storm-troopers came into his house and told him that he was wanted for work in the hotel. My son thought it was for carpenter's work, and said that he would go tomorrow; but they said that would not do; a man had been killed and a coffin was wanted at once. So my son took his rule to measure the body, and went to the hotel. The body was in a great bedroom, which has the number seventeen, and he was surprised at this, for he could not think why they should take a dead man into the best room. This, you understand, is what he told Greta, his wife, when he returned home.'

`Did he see the body?'

`Yes – and no. A doctor whom he did not know was there, with the body on the bed, but it was so wrapped up in bandages that he could not see the face. There was blood on the bandages, and on the bedclothes, but when he asked about this the doctor bade him sternly to take the measurements and ask no questions. So he took the measurements and departed, with instructions to work all night and make the coffin. Which he did. Just before noon the next day it was finished, and he, helped by the storm-troopers, took it across. He did not come back; not that day, nor the next; nor has his unhappy wife seen him since.'

`You mean – he disappeared?'

`That is what I mean.'

`But did not his wife make inquiries?'

`Yes. She was told that he had gone away, but would return later. If she asked questions she would never see him again. The head of the storm-troopers also asked her if her husband had spoken about what he had seen the night before, and she, fearing for herself, and him, said "No, nothing". They told her threateningly to speak to no one about what had happened. Nor has she, except to me, to whom she came in her grief.'

`But what of the funeral? Did she not see it?'

`No. It was all done very quietly and secretly, at the break of dawn.'

`How do you know that it was at dawn, if it was so secret?' demanded Biggles instantly.

`Because my daughter-in-law, hearing a noise, went to the window of her room and saw the coffin brought out — the hotel being in view of her house. So she sent Joachim, her little boy, to see if he could see his father. From the woods he saw the funeral, but he did not see his father. There were only the storm-troopers there, and they put the coffin in the vault on the western side, near the tower.'

Biggles started. 'In the what?'

`The vault.'

Biggles was silent for a moment. 'Then it was not an ordinary grave?' he said slowly.

`No. The church is very old, and there are vaults, although it is long since they were used.'

`How are the entrances to these vaults sealed?'

Ì do not know that. It is not my church. Only once was I there, many years ago; but if I remember, the vaults are behind slabs of stone. That is the truth, and that is all I know.

And now spare

an old man's anguish and be gone, for if anyone should find you here it would be very bad for both of us.'

Biggles nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'we will go. We shall forget we ever saw you, and you will forget that you have seen us.' As he spoke he handed the money to the old Jew, who seized the notes eagerly and thrust them far down inside his ragged shirt.

He had not yet withdrawn his hand, and Biggles was in the act of rising to leave the room, when a sound broke the temporary silence. It was so slight that in the ordinary way it would not have been noticed; nor would it have been audible had the conversation persisted. It was merely the slight creak of a door.

Biggles turned like lightning. The door was open perhaps an inch. Yet it had, he knew, been closed and latched after they had entered. The

old man had seen to that.

The Jew's terror was pitiful to behold. A faint moan broke from his ashen lips, and he nearly collapsed. His eyes, saucer-wide with fear, stared at the door. His lips moved noiselessly.

Biggles's mouth set in a hard line. He motioned Ginger to remain still. 'Thank you very much, Father,' he said in a loud voice. 'I think we shall be able to find our way now.' But as he spoke he tiptoed towards the door with cat-like tread. Reaching it, with a swift movement he jerked it wide open.

A girl, young, good-looking, dressed in a neat brown tweed costume, stood on the threshold.

Ginger stared unbelievably at the pale face, surmounted by golden hair. Whatever he had expected, it was certainly not this.

Biggles, too, stared. But his hand went slowly to his head, and he raised his cap with a little bow. 'Good evening, Fraulein,' he said pleasantly. 'Have you, like us, lost your way?

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The girl did not answer immediately. She seemed as taken aback to see Biggles as he was to see her. 'Yes — yes, yes,' she stammered at last.

'Then you had better ask the old man your way,' continued Biggles evenly, trusting that the Jew had recovered himself sufficiently to be able to speak. 'He has been kind enough to tell us what we wanted to know. We are just going.' Then, turning, 'Good-night,' he called over his shoulder to the old man, and beckoning to Ginger, made ready to depart.

The girl stepped aside to allow them to pass.

Biggles whistled softly as he walked down the path towards the gate, and so out on to the road. Not until he had taken some fifty paces did he speak. 'Well, laddie,' he said, 'that little interlude has given us something to think about.'

'What was that girl after?'

'Heaven alone knows. She was just about the last sort of person I should expect there.'

'She was listening.'

'Yes, I think she was. A funny business.'

'What was the old man talking about all that time? I wish to goodness I could speak German.'

'Let's go to the hotel; then I'll tell you all about it,' said Biggles. 'That looks like it, just ahead on the left. Handsome place, isn't it?'

'Let's hope it's a case of "handsome is as handsome does",' murmured Ginger aptly.

CHAPTER V

Under the Castle Walls

As they walked slowly up the deserted village street towards the hotel, Biggles gave Ginger the gist of his conversation

with the old Jew; for, as it had been carried on in German, he had not understood a word of it. 'This business of Beklinder being buried in a vault instead of a grave fairly staggered me for a minute, I can tell you,' he said. 'It will alter our plans. It may make the exhumation easier or it may make it harder; that's something we shan't know until we see the vault. Still, it's a very good thing we found out about it, otherwise we should have wasted a lot of time looking for a grave that doesn't exist, and so possibly have arrived at an incorrect conclusion. We shall have to go and take a look at this vault at the first opportunity — probably tonight, if our room is so situated that we can get out without being seen. But here is the hotel. Let's go in and get things fixed up. It will be interesting to see what sort of reception we get; we shall soon know whether we are welcome or otherwise.'

The hotel was a large, rambling, but rather impressive building, obviously medieval in its inspiration. Surmounted by a tower, the roof was broken by innumerable gables, each complete with diamond-paned windows, and decorated with much ornate timbering, as was, in fact, the whole building, in the style now commonly referred to in England as 'black and white'. An imposing timber porch, carrying the insignia of several international touring associations, protected the main entrance.

Biggles opened the door and they went into a long, low-ceilinged reception hall. A log fire smouldered sullenly at one end. As they stood in momentary hesitation, looking for the reception office, a

heavily built man, typically German in appearance, arose from behind a counter at which he had been sitting and came towards them. 'At your service, gentlemen,' he said in English with a strong foreign accent, at the same time drawing himself up and making a stiff little bow.

'You are a good judge of nationality,' smiled Biggles.

'I should be a bad judge if I did not recognize English clothes,' returned the man smoothly.

Biggles nodded, knowing that what the man had said was true; there was nothing particularly clever in his assumption. after all. 'Am I speaking to the proprietor?' he asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Good,' answered Biggles. 'We are on a walking tour, and we should like to stay here for a few days if you can accommodate us.' 'Tor how long?'

'Two days — three days — perhaps a week. We have no definite plans. If we like it here we may even stay longer. You have some rooms?'

'But certainly. We have few visitors so early in the year. You require two rooms?'

'No,' replied Biggles quickly. 'We would prefer a large room with two beds.' As he spoke an idea came into his mind. The best you have,' he added.

'Of course — of course,' agreed the proprietor. 'I can show you a room of much excellence.' He walked stiffly to the key-rack that almost covered the wall behind the reception counter and unhooked the one that hung below a disk bearing the figure 18.

'What about number seventeen?' suggested Biggles casually.

The man stopped dead in what he was doing. Then he went on again. It was as if the words had for an instant bereft him of the power of movement. There was a curious timbre in his voice when he asked, 'Why that number?'

Biggles had his answer ready. 'Oh, it just happens to be my lucky

number, that's all,' he answered nonchalantly.

'Number seventeen is not a double room,' said the man slowly, but with unmistakable deliberation.

Biggles passed the matter off as if it were of no account. 'That's all right,' he said lightly. '

Any number will do.'

'You will find that number eighteen is a room most comfortable,' announced the proprietor, laying the key on the counter; then, taking two forms from a sheaf that stood in a letter-rack, he placed one before each of his visitors. 'Please to fill in these forms,' he said. 'Have you baggage?'

'Only what you can see,' Biggles told him.

'Then I must ask you to pay a deposit in advance.'

'With pleasure.' Biggles took a thousand-mark note from his wallet and laid it on the counter. 'Please tell me when that is exhausted,' he said.

The hotel proprietor's manner changed when he saw the note. It became obsequious. It was obvious that if he had judged his visitor's nationality correctly, he had been in error over their financial status. 'Will you please to fill in the forms now,' he said again 'I regret, gentlemen, but this is the regulation, you know.

Just at the top part will be sufficient. If you will leave me your passports I can fill in the rest.'

Biggles nodded. 'You speak English very well; have you been in England?' he inquired, as, picking up a pen, he filled in the questions concerning his parents' nationality, his last stopping-place, and other details which could not be completed from his passport.

'Yes, for five years I was a waiter in London,' admitted the man.

Biggles judged him to be about fifty years of age. That was before the War, I suppose?'

he suggested.

'Yes.' The man's manner changed again. It became almost curt, suggesting that he was not interested in personalities – at least. those

which concerned himself.

'Are there any other English visitors here?' asked Biggles, as the man picked up the key and invited them to follow him towards a sweeping wooden staircase, black with age, that led upwards from a corner of the entrance hall.

'No,' was the short response. 'Mind your head on the beam, if you please.'

After traversing a long corridor on the first floor he stopped. The number plate attached to the key jangled as the door swung open. He stood aside to allow his visitors to enter.

'Yes, this will do very well,' agreed Biggles, glancing around appreciatively, for the room was spacious and furnished in excellent, if old-fashioned, style.

'I thought you would like it. You will require dinner – yes? It is rather past the usual hour, but—'

'Yes, we should like something to eat,' Biggles told him. 'Shall we say in about ten minutes?'

'Very well. The bell is here by the door. Should you require anything ring once for the waiter and twice for the chambermaid. Will you take breakfast in your room?'

'No, thanks — we shall probably come down for it.'

The hotel proprietor bowed and withdrew.

'Everything seems all right so far,' murmured Biggles as soon as he had gone. 'Frankly, I quite expected to find that we were unwelcome, but I couldn't detect anything in mine host's manner to suggest it — although he shied a bit when I mentioned room seventeen.'

But let's have a wash and go down for a bite of food; I can do with some.'

They were not long taking such things as they required, pyjamas and toilet requisites, from their rucksacks, and after a quick wash and brush up they went down to the dining-room, which, in keeping with the rest of the building, they found to be in the nature of a baronial hall. An elderly waiter in a white apron and napkin on his arm came

forward to meet them and showed them the table that had been laid for them.

But Ginger barely noticed these things, for his attention was entirely taken up by the only other person in the room. It was the golden-haired girl in brown whom they had last seen at the Jew's house. She was just beginning her soup, and it was obvious from her manner that she was a guest at the hotel. For a moment she stared as hard at the new-comers as they at her.

Ginger looked up and caught Biggles's eye. There was a curious expression on Biggles's face. 'That gives us something else to think about, doesn't it?' he murmured dryly.

'She's having a jolly good look at us,' said Ginger, in a low voice.

I've noticed it. She's evidently staying here — alone, too. What was she doing prowling round the Jew's house, I wonder? I mean, her movements were a good deal more like those of a burglar than ours were. We did at least knock on the door.'

'She behaved like an eavesdropper,' declared Ginger, as he pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

'She certainly did. I wonder how much she heard of our conversation — not that guessing will help us. We shall have to keep an eye on her. The odd thing is, although I cannot help feeling that it must be pure coincidence, her face seems vaguely familiar.'

I didn't like to say so for fear that you would accuse me again of being nervous, but since you mention it I don't mind admitting that the same thought struck me,' declared Ginger.

'Tim,' mused Biggles, 'a funny business. But let's get on and finish the meal. I'd like to have a stroll round outside before turning in — unless you're too tired.'

'Me tired? Not in the least,' asserted Ginger. 'Let us stroll, by all means.'

They hastened the meal to a conclusion, although they took particular care not to make this obvious, after which they went back upstairs for their caps. Biggles slipped an electric torch into his pocket at the same time, after which they made their way back to the entrance hall.

The proprietor was standing at his desk, reading a paper. 'You are

going walking again tonight?' he asked, in a not unfriendly manner.

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'Just a stroll round the village to get our bearings before turning in.' Which, in the circumstances, he thought not unreasonable. And with that they passed on into the street.

'Where are you going — to the churchyard?' whispered Ginger as soon as they were outside.

'Not yet. Later, perhaps. We shall have to make a pretence of going to bed, so we can't very well stay out for a couple of hours. That would look a bit too odd.'

They stood for a moment or two looking about them. The moon was now well up and they could see their surroundings fairly clearly. 'Let's have a look in here,' said Biggles, indicating what no doubt had originally been a coach entrance, but was now the way to the garage.

There was nobody about, so they strolled slowly round the extensive outbuildings unquestioned. Beyond them there was a wide kitchen garden, walled on one side, with a dilapidated lean-to greenhouse occupying part of its length. The other part was taken up by a shed. Biggles, after an apparently casual but in reality penetrating glance round to make sure that they were not observed, walked slowly towards it. 'With luck we may find in here something we shall need,' he said.

'What's that?'

À crow-bar, or a stout piece of timber. I imagine we shall need such an instrument to get into the vault.'

The shed was not locked, so there was no difficulty about gaining admittance. Biggles's torch cut a wedge of light into the darkness, and rested, as he had hoped, on an array of gardening tools, old wheelbarrows, a rusty lawn-mower and other garden furniture, none of which looked as if it had been touched for years. Against the wall, amongst a litter of old spades, rakes, hoes, worn-out brooms, and an axe with a cracked shaft, they found what they sought. There were, in fact, several pieces of iron of various lengths which in emergency might have suited their purpose. 'Good,' murmured Biggles. 'Had we not found one in here we should have had to ask the old Jew to help us again, and I'd rather keep away from him.'

'He'd rather we kept out of his way, too,' murmured Ginger.

Leaving the tools where they were, they made their way back to the road and walked unconcernedly down the middle of it in the direction opposite the one by which they had entered the village, until at last they came to the point where it disappeared into the forest. Biggles noticed a lane winding uphill on the left-hand side. 'That, I fancy, leads to the castle,' he observed.

'That's the direction, anyway,' agreed Ginger. 'By the way, that reminds me, as I was coming down on my brolly I thought I saw a light there.'

Biggles stopped dead. 'In the castle?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

Ginger hesitated. 'It's hard to be certain. I thought I saw a light, but it was gone almost at once.'

'I'm. That's queer. My information was that the castle was a ruin. Let's stroll along a bit; it isn't far, and if anyone sees us it can hardly be said that we are behaving suspiciously.'

As Biggles said, their manner was that of casual tourists; at least, in that they made no attempt at concealment. It was dark under the trees, which closed in on the lane on both sides, but sufficient moonlight penetrated for them to advance without using the torch.

After about a quarter of an hour's walk the lane steepened; then the forest terminated abruptly and the massive pile of the castle loomed up grotesquely in the moonlight before them. Not a light showed anywhere. A little breeze had got up and moaned dismally through the pines.

'A grim-looking sort of spot,' murmured Ginger.

'Yes, I should say some dirty work has gone on here in the past,' agreed Biggles, walking closer to the mighty bastions

which girded the castle itself. 'This is as far as we can get, apparently,' he continued, when the roadway ended at a broad gateway of heavy, iron-studded timber, which was closed.

'Let's walk along here for a bit,' suggested Ginger, indicating a narrow, weed-covered track that skirted the bastion on their right. 'There

seems to be a sort of building on the top of the wall there — stables, or something,' he went on. 'There's a window, too. If one could get up to it it might be possible to get on the wall and drop down on the inside.'

'I don't think it's the ideal moment to start exploring the castle,' murmured Biggles. 'I doubt whether it is likely to produce anything of interest to us anyway, although we might have a look at it sometime. That window up there is barred, isn't it?'

Ginger strained his eyes upwards. 'I think so,' he said. 'By standing on your shoulders I could just about reach it. Lend me the torch and give me a bunk up — I'll have a look inside.'

Biggles glanced up and down the path. There was nobody in sight. 'Right you are,' he said, handing Ginger the torch and making a 'back' for him to mount on.

Ginger, holding the torch between his teeth, climbed up on his unsteady perch. As Biggles straightened his back and thus brought him nearer to the window he gripped the bottom bars with his left hand to take as much weight as possible off Biggles's shoulders.

When his eyes grew level with the opening he took the torch from his teeth and directed a shaft of light inside. For perhaps fifteen seconds he remained thus. Then he flicked out the light and dropped back to the ground. He was slightly breathless.

'What is it?' asked Biggles tersely, sensing from his manner that he had seen something.

'There's a car there.'

'A car? What sort of car?'

Ginger drew a deep breath. 'It looks to me like a Morris Ten.'

There was a moment's silence. 'By thunder! That puts a different complexion on things,'

breathed Biggles. 'Beklinder's car was a Morris Ten. If that isn't his then it's an uncanny coincidence. Was it damaged?'

Not a mark on it that I could see.'

Biggles whistled softly. 'We'll look a bit closer into this,' he breathed.

But before he could suit the action to the word there came a sound from farther along the path that sent them both with one accord scuttling into the dense shadow of the trees on their right, for at this point the forest approached nearly to the castle walls. It was only a slight noise, but it was significant; the mere rattle of a piece of stone against another. Slight as the sound was they both knew that it could only have been caused by human or animal agency, for stones do not move by themselves.

Biggles, holding Ginger by the arm so that they would not lose each other in the darkness, backed farther into the trees until there was a good ten yards between them and the path, but in a position from which it could be seen. A few moments later the dark outline of a man appeared round a bend in the moonlit path, and it was clear at once from his dress and manner that he was a guard, or sentry. In breeches, military field boots, and a shirt of dark-coloured material, he wore no jacket, but a leather belt with revolver holster attached gave him the appearance of an irregular soldier. He came slowly on, looking about him in an inconsequential manner, as if he had performed the same duty many times before and did not expect to see anything of interest.

When he reached the junction of the path and the roadway he stopped and squatted on a large piece of fallen stone.

'I hope he isn't going to sit there long,' breathed Biggles in Ginger's ear. 'We couldn't move without him hearing us.'

The sentry sat long enough to cause them some anxiety, but at the end of about ten minutes he rose, and after looking at his wrist watch walked up to the heavy door upon which he struck a heavy blow, twice repeated.

Almost at once it was opened, and a second man, dressed in a similar uniform, joined him. Thereupon a conversation was begun, but in tones too low for Biggles to hear what was being said. This went on for several minutes when the distant sound of a Klaxon horn galvanized them to sudden activity; the first man marched up and down in a brisk, soldier-like manner, and the second man threw the gates wide open, keeping them in that position with two heavy stones. A moment later a car could be heard coming up the roadway. Its blinding headlights threw the scene into high relief in a curiously flat manner, so that the picture thus presented was like a piece of stage scenery.

The car, a large dark limousine, drove straight through the gateway

without stopping.

The gates were then closed, with the two guards on the inside.

Biggles and Ginger remained still for several minutes, not daring to move; but when the guards did not reappear they began to edge towards the roadway. They did not step out on to it, however, but, keeping parallel with it, began to make their way back towards the village. Not until they were once more in the main street did they breathe freely.

'My goodness! We nearly walked into something that time,' muttered Biggles. '

Whatever it is, there is more going on behind



*The car drove straight through the gateway
without stopping.*

those grey walls than appears on the outside. But come on, we must get back to the hotel or the proprietor will wonder what the dickens we are up to. He must know that something is going on at the castle.'

They hurried back to the hotel, where they found the proprietor sitting at his desk, a newspaper in his hand. He looked up as they entered, glanced at the ornate wooden clock which hung on the wall, folded his newspaper and laid it aside.

Biggles took the key of their room from its hook. 'Good-night,' he said.

The proprietor inclined his head. 'Good-night, gentlemen. At what time would you like to be called in the morning?' he asked suavely.

'Oh, you'd better wait until we ring. We'll see how we feel,' returned Biggles, and with a nod passed on to the staircase. Reaching their room, he was putting the key in the lock when a movement made him glance down the corridor. A door was slowly closing. He said nothing, however, until they were inside their room and the door shut. 'That young lady seems to be extremely interested in our movements,' he said quietly.

'Was it her?' I couldn't quite see—'

'I think so. Apparently there is nobody else in the hotel, so it must have been her.'

Biggles locked the door on the inside and dropped the key on the dressing-table. 'We shall have to be careful what we say, even in here,' he whispered, as he sat down on his bed. 'We might be overheard – if somebody was sufficiently curious to listen.'

'I'll remember it,' agreed Ginger, in an undertone. 'For the first evening we haven't done too badly. What's the next move?'

'I feel like keeping the ball rolling while the coast seems reasonably clear,' replied Biggles. 'We shall have to stay here and rest, I think, until everyone has settled down for the night. Then, if we can get out of the window, as no doubt we can, we'll go and have a look at the churchyard. There is a moon, and I'd rather go now than in broad daylight, when people might be about. We must get back before dawn, though. We can sleep on in the morning if we're very tired. In fact, if those blackshirts, or brownshirts, or whatever they are, are prowling about, we may be safer indoors than outside.'

'That suits me,' agreed Ginger, kicking off his shoes, and making himself comfortable on the bed.

Somewhere downstairs a clock chimed the midnight hour.

CHAPTER VI

What Happened at the Vault

An hour and a half later Biggles got up from his bed, put a pair of

light tennis shoes on his feet, and began collecting

certain articles together on the table. From his rucksack he took a thin, but strong cotton rope, knotted at intervals; beside it he laid a screwdriver and the electric torch. 'Time to be moving, laddie,' he told Ginger, who had fallen into a doze.

Ginger sprang to his feet. 'Phew, I was nearly asleep,' he said in a startled voice. 'Is everything O.K.?'

'I think so. The house has been quiet for some time.' Biggles went to the window, and quietly opened one of the lattice diamond-paned frames which overlooked the courtyard just inside the coach entrance. They were on the first floor, so the distance to the ground was not far, a matter of a mere fifteen feet. He looked up and down, listening intently, but there was no sound. Even the breeze had died away, leaving the atmosphere heavy and humid, as if it might rain. A tenuous veil of mist half obscured the moon.

'I think it's all clear,' he whispered, turning back into the room. 'Give me a hand to move the bed right up to the window. We shall have to pass the rope round the bedpost to let ourselves

down; there doesn't seem to be anything else firm enough. I'm afraid it's going to be a bit of a job getting the rope back on it to pull ourselves up when we return, but we daren't leave the rope hanging in case any one happens to pass, and sees it. No matter. If we put the bedpost right up against the window so that we can see it from outside we should be able to manage it all right. In any case, it's only a matter of ten or twelve feet. They built these old places with low ceilings — as you have probably noticed. If the worst comes to the worst you could pretty nearly reach the windowsill by standing on my shoulders. We shall have to leave the window open, but I don't think that matters; being English, they would expect us to sleep with our window wide open, anyway.'

Preparations for departure were soon complete, Biggles stowing his equipment, with the exception of the rope, in the big inside pocket of the sports jacket he was wearing. '

Ready? You go first,' he ordered.

Holding the rope to steady himself, Ginger crawled backwards through the window and lowered himself hand over hand to the ground. Biggles followed, and, drawing the rope clear, coiled it and put it in his pocket. Then, keeping close to the wall, their rubber-soled

shoes making no sound on the cobblestones, they made their way to the tool-shed where Biggles collected the crowbar. This done they retraced their steps and continued on to the village street, now silent and deserted, and set off at a brisk pace for the churchyard. Not a light showed anywhere.

Not until they were clear of the houses did Biggles speak again. 'We've tackled some queer jobs in our time, but this is about the grimmest,' he said quietly. 'In fact, I've never set about anything with less enthusiasm; but there's no way out of it. No matter. In an hour or two, with any luck, the first part of our job will be done.'

The road that led to their destination was desolate, and, as they expected, deserted; only the distant barking of a dog, and the occasional melancholy stirring of the pines, broke the silence. The track, for the way could hardly be called a road, was sandy, so they made no sound as they trudged along. Rounding a bend the pines straggled out on to open ground, and the dark silhouette of the church, looking huge in the deceptive light, loomed up before them.

Examination revealed that the churchyard was surrounded only by a low stone wall, so ignoring the elaborate wicket gate they vaulted over the low obstruction and went on towards the church, picking their way between the mounds of earth that marked the last resting-place of generations of simple villagers. Few of the graves carried a headstone.

One or two could boast of a rough wooden cross, in varying stages of dilapidation.

Nothing moved.

One thing is pretty certain,' remarked Biggles, with a mirthless little laugh. 'We are not likely to be interrupted. Most people give churchyards a wide berth at this hour — the days of body snatchers being over.'

'I feel a bit like a body snatcher myself,' grumbled Ginger. 'I never did have much time for churchyards at night. If anything moves I shall probably let out a yell. I find this a most depressing business.'

'I'm not exactly bursting with hilarity myself,' admitted Biggles seriously. 'Let's keep going. If the Jew was right the vault is at the foot of the tower, on this side.'

'I'm not going down into any spooky vault,' growled Ginger.

'Please yourself. If there are any spooks about they are just as likely to be on top as underneath,' bantered Biggles.

By this time they had reached the west wall of the church tower, so Biggles stopped and, taking out his flashlight, started examining the wall closely, looking for the entrance to the vault. It was not difficult to find, for there was only one, and it showed signs of having been recently disturbed. Actually, the entrance was not in the wall; the stone that closed it rested on a few courses of brickwork sunk into the ground at right-angles to the wall. Biggles's flashlight rested for a moment on the slab. 'Ah,' he said quietly, 'I thought they wouldn't overlook that.' Incised on the stone, in clear letters, was a name. It was M.

Beklinder. Under the name was a date, followed by the customary letters R.I.P.

Switching off the torch, he put it in his pocket and allowed the end of the crow-bar to drop gently on the slab, so that it gave out a hollow booming sound. 'When I prise the stone up with the bar you grab it and hang on to it until I can help you,' Biggles ordered. '

I'll try to fix the bar at an angle so that it keeps the entrance open. There is no need for us to lift it off altogether, because it might be difficult to put it back so that it fits exactly.

We only need an aperture wide enough to get through.'

Ginger glanced apprehensively round the melancholy scene and shivered. 'O.K.,' he said,

'go ahead. Let's get the ghoulish business finished.'

'What's the matter, are you afraid of something?' inquired Biggles.

'I certainly am '

Of what?'

'Spooks.'

'Spooks my grandmother! Where did you get such ideas? For my part, I should be most interested to see one, because I've never seen one yet – and I never shall.'

'You may get your wish presently,' muttered Ginger.

Biggles laughed. 'Rot! Believe me, we're a lot safer here than we were up at the castle. I observed that those fellows in the dark shirts carried guns, and doubtless they would have used them had they seen us; but I can't imagine a spook cluttering itself up with such material things as firearms. According to what I've read they rely on hollow groans and clanking chains—'

'Will you shut up and get the lid off this death hole?' snorted Ginger. 'The sooner I'm back in my little cot at the hotel the happier I shall be.'

Biggles said no more, but driving the sharp end of the crow-bar under the edge of the slab, raised it sufficiently for him to get a more secure grip. Then, putting all his weight on the iron, he levered the stone cover several inches into the air. Ginger grabbed it and held on while Biggles allowed the bar to fall and seize the other side. 'Now,' he grunted, and the stone came up on end, steady on its own weight. 'Hold it like that for a minute,'

went on Biggles quickly. 'For heaven's sake don't let it fall.' He drove the bar diagonally into the ground so that by allowing the slab to come forward again it rested on the blunt end and remained in that position. 'Good,' said Biggles, 'I think that's done the trick. Will you go first?'

'Not on your life,' declared Ginger, starting back.

Biggles chuckled and took out his torch.

'This seems to strike you as funny,' sneered Ginger.

'No, frankly, it does not,' Biggles told him earnestly. 'But surely it is better to treat the thing lightly than take it too seriously, or

we might both get the screaming heebie-jeebies, which would be silly now that we're actually on the spot.'

As he spoke Biggles knelt down and directed the ray of the torch into the vault. The yellow light revealed a flight of steps leading down into a gloomy recess, the limits of which could not be seen. Without any more ado he slid through the opening and made his way carefully down the steps. His voice came up to Ginger, who was also kneeling, peering into the vault. 'It's all right. I'm standing on the floor.'

Ginger followed Biggles down the steps, ultimately finding himself in what might be best described as a large, rectangular room. It was, of course, entirely devoid of furniture, but round the walls, laid

lengthways in niches built for their reception, rested what were unmistakably coffins Above each, let into the wall, was a metal plate bearing a name.

Biggles walked to the nearest, read the name, and then began to move slowly along the line. 'These are all pretty ancient; he observed. `11m. There seems to have been a lot of nobility living hereabouts at one time — at the castle, I expect. Counts and countesses

— barons — why, here is even a prince, eighteen years old; he died in the plague of 1660.'

`Never mind about him; find the one that matters and let's get out,' urged Ginger.

Biggles went on along the line. Ah!' he exclaimed. 'Here are some more recent dates. We'

re in the eighteenth century now. What's this one — 1815. That was the year of Waterloo, if I remember my history.'

And so Biggles went on, although he did not linger anywhere, for it was possible to judge in a moment from the condition of the name-plate how long each coffin had been there. '

It still puzzles

me why they buried Beklinder here, instead of in an ordinary grave,' he remarked.

Almost immediately afterwards he found the name he sought, and announced it triumphantly. The nameplate was new, as was the coffin below it. 'We shan't be long now,' he declared. 'You take the torch and stand over there, and throw the beam in my direction so that I can see what I'm doing. You'd better look the other way — in case of accidents; but if my guess is right we're likely to find in this coffin anything but what that name-plate says it contains.' So saying, he handed Ginger the torch, and taking the screwdriver from his pocket, set to work on his odious task.

‘I’ll tell you another thing,’ he went on presently. ‘The fellow who put these screws in was either a rotten undertaker — or else he wasn’t an undertaker at all. They’re all loose.’

Ginger, staring into the darkness, heard the scraping of the coffin lid as Biggles gently withdrew it. His nerves tingled as Biggles laughed

softly.

‘It’s all right,’ came Biggles’s voice. ‘Come and take a look at poor Max Beklinder.’

Ginger swung round. ‘Books!’ he gasped.

‘A good way of getting rid of your old books and magazines,’ said Biggles dryly. ‘They weigh heavy just about as heavy as a body. Well, that’s all we want to know. I’ll soon have this lid on again.’ With that, Biggles pushed the lid back into place and began replacing the screws.

‘Do you know what made me laugh when I looked in the coffin?’ he asked, as he worked.

‘No — unless it was relief.’

‘It wasn’t that; it was the title of the top book.’

‘What was it?’

‘Grimm’s Fairy Tales. If this deception isn’t like a fairy tale, I don’t know what is.’

Biggles mopped his forehead with his handkerchief as he finished his task and took the torch from Ginger’s hand, for he had been working with almost furious speed and the atmosphere in the vault was stuffy. ‘Thank goodness that’s over,’ he announced. ‘We’ll get along home — ssh! What’s that?’ He broke off and switched out the light so that they were in absolute darkness. His hand gripped Ginger’s arm like a vice.

Ginger’s blood seemed to freeze as from somewhere not far away came a curious soft swishing sound. It stopped, and then came on again, the sound appearing to come from the entrance to the vault, which in the utter darkness now showed as a narrow strip of dark grey light.

‘What — what is it?’ gasped Ginger.

Biggles did not answer. On the contrary he shook Ginger’s arm impatiently for silence.

And thus they stood while the seconds ticked by at a speed infinitely slower than the spasmodic thumping of Ginger’s heart. Then, as they stared at the opening, it was suddenly blotted out as if something had filled it.

To Ginger, time seemed to stand still. There was no future, no past;

only the dreadful present. The suspense was such that only by clenching his teeth could he prevent himself from crying out aloud. Then, whatever it was at the mouth of the vault moved aside, and the grey strip reappeared.

Biggles cupped his hands round his mouth close against Ginger's face. 'There is somebody out there,' he breathed. 'Don't move.'

Slowly the seconds passed, and became minutes, each minute seeming like an eternity.

But whatever it was that had passed the opening did not return.

'I've had enough of this; I'm going to have a look outside,' whispered Biggles at last. '

We can't stay here all night.' Moving a few inches at a time he began to make his way towards the exit.

Still nothing had happened by the time he reached it. Not a sound came from outside.

Again Biggles halted; Ginger joined him and they remained motionless while two or three more minutes passed; then, with infinite caution, Biggles began to creep up the steps, with Ginger, fearful of being left alone, keeping pace with him; for the steps were wide enough to admit two, no doubt for the more easy access of the coffin-bearers.

On hands and knees they reached a step high enough for them to get a view of the moonlit yard outside. There was nobody in sight. With a deep gasp of relief Ginger began to move forward, and had half emerged from the vault when what he had taken to be a headstone suddenly came to life. With a wild screech something white fluttered into the air, and then swept swiftly over the graves.

Ginger did not see what became of it. His cry of horror was drowned in the screech and he fell back into the vault. Biggles's fist caught him in the ribs. 'Keep your head,' he said, angrily. 'It's gone. Let's get out.'

'Where did it — where did it go?' panted Ginger.

'It jumped the wall, and as far as I can make out disappeared down the road.'

'My gosh! I nearly died of fright,' muttered Ginger weakly, passing a

trembling hand over a clammy brow. 'Who said there were no such things as spooks, eh? Now what about it? If that wasn't a spook, what was it?'

Obviously, I don't know who it was, but you can take it from me that it was no spook. It was a human being.'

It didn't look much like a human being to me,' asserted Ginger emphatically. 'Didn't you see that white thing fluttering?'

I did,' agreed Biggles curtly.

By this time they had emerged from the vault and were standing erect. Biggles switched on his torch and directed the beam to the ground at the place where the figure had been standing when they had first seen it. 'Take a look at that,' he said, pointing to a spot where the dew-soaked turf had been trampled down. 'Spooks don't trample down the grass, nor do they leave a trail. Look, you can see the way the fellow ran across the grass.

'By jingo, you're right,' declared Ginger. 'It begins to look as if somebody followed us here.'

I don't know about that,' replied Biggles, 'but one thing is certain; there was somebody here in this churchyard tonight besides us, close against this vault, somebody dressed in a manner well calculated to frighten anyone else who came along. It was rather a clever idea to dress up like a ghost. We might have done the same thing had we thought of it.

One day we may discover who it was, but at the moment it isn't much use guessing, although at the back of my mind I have the glimmering of an idea — but come on; let's get this slab back into place. We've done pretty well, I think, although this spook business is a bit disconcerting. There certainly is something very funny going on around here, although how far it has to do with the Professor is a question we can't answer.'

Without any difficulty they lowered the slab back to its original position. Satisfied that there was nothing to betray that it had been moved, they brushed their clothes, and after concealing the crow-bar under a nearby yew, in case it were needed again, they set off back towards the hotel, moving with caution and keeping to the side of the road as far as it was possible in case their movements were being

watched. But if such was the case they saw no signs of it, and in due course reached the hotel yard without seeing a soul. Keeping close against the wall, Biggles took the rope from his inside pocket, and making a wide noose in the end, undertook the rather tricky job of catching it round the bedpost. After several failures he succeeded, and the rest was easy. Biggles went up the rope first. Ginger followed him. As he stepped inside he tapped Biggles on the arm. 'I'll tell you something,' he said.

What?'

'The girl next door saw us come in.'

'The dickens! How do you know? There was no light in her room.'

'Maybe not, but I saw the curtain move.'

Biggles shook his head as he pulled in the rope and closed the window. 'That's a pity,' he said, turning back into the room. 'I can't get that girl placed at all. It seems as if she is watching us, but, somehow, I don't see how she can be — or rather, why she should be.'

Her arrival at the Jew's house must have been purely coincidental with ours, for until that moment she could not have been aware of our existence, any more than we were aware of the Jew's existence.'

'She might have been watching the house, and saw us go in,' suggested Ginger.

'That's true,' admitted Biggles. 'If that assumption is correct, it leads to the question, on whose behalf was she watching the house? She doesn't look the sort of person who would be engaged by those concerned with the Professor's disappearance, or the storm-troopers whom we know are at the castle. It seems equally unlikely that she can be working on her own account; yet it must

be one or the other — unless, of course, our caution has made us take an exaggerated view of her actions, and she is only an ordinary tourist, after all.'

'She doesn't strike me that way,' said Ginger slowly, shaking his head.

'Nor me, I must admit. It will be interesting to see how she reacts when she suspects that we are watching her.'

'Are you going to watch her?'

‘Possibly, if it doesn't retard our own plans. If she is watching us we shall certainly have to keep an eye on her, for she becomes a danger. At the rate things are going we shall probably pick up a clue presently, that will put us on the right track. But actually, I am more concerned about that spook than I am about the girl. I can't make head or tail of that affair. What the deuce was the person playing at? Why play the spook? Only a lunatic does that sort of thing without a good reason. Had there been a storm-trooper on guard I could have understood it — but a spook, no. The people concerned with the Beklinder affair would surely not play fool tricks like that. Can you imagine von Stalhein countenancing such childish methods, because I can't? But there, we might sit here all night asking ourselves questions without being any the wiser.’

‘Questions — such as?’

‘Did the spook know we were in the vault?’

‘It certainly saw us come out.’

‘Yes, and from the way it gave tongue it was as startled as we were. Well, maybe things will work themselves out in due course; we shall see. We ought to see about getting some sleep. We've had a long day, and there is no doubt that things have gone exceptionally well for us. I hope they'll go as well tomorrow.’

‘What's the next move?’

‘We'll get the pigeon away first thing in the morning. But now I come to think of it there is just one more little job that we ought to do tonight. We shall probably have to do it sometime and the present moment seems as good as any. There's nothing like following up your luck when it is going well.’

‘What are you contemplating?’

‘I'd like to have a look in the room next door — number seventeen, the room the Jew told us Beklinder was put in. There might be something to learn there, and it would be dangerous to try to get in in the daytime. The key is on the rack downstairs, and so far as I can see there is nothing to prevent us from using it.’

‘Shall I go down and get it?’ suggested Ginger, watching Biggles coil the rope and hide it under the mattress of his bed.

‘Yes. Take the torch — and watch your step. Don't for the love of Mike

knock anything over.'

'Leave it to me,' murmured Ginger, picking up the torch and crossing over to the door.

Taking the greatest possible care to ensure silence, he unlocked it and went out into the corridor. All was silent, so after a moment's hesitation he began to make his way towards the head of the stairs.

There was nothing particularly difficult about his task, although the profound silence, and the heavy, old-fashioned panelling and furniture, created an air of brooding mystery that caused his nerves to tingle. However, he reached the hall without anything happening and turned the beam of the torch on the rack. As the hotel was practically empty all the keys were in place — except three; their own, number fifteen, which he realized must be the number of the girl's room, and number seventeen. The key he had come to fetch was not there. For a moment he stared at the vacant hook, taken aback by this unexpected turn of events and what it portended. Then, realizing the full significance of his discovery, he hurried back to where Biggles was waiting for him. 'The key's gone,'

he breathed.

Biggles's response to this information was àtck' of surprise. 'It looks as if the proprietor takes it with him when he goes to bed,' murmured Ginger.

'Or is somebody using the room, after all?' suggested Biggles. 'I think we must look into this. Were any other keys missing?' 'Only number fifteen, which I imagine is the girl's room.' 'Àh! I wonder if she's in her room?'

'You can't very well find out.'

'Can't I, though?'

'How?'

'By trying her door.'

'By gosh! You've got a nerve.'

'If she's inside it will be locked for a certainty.'

'And if it is not locked?'

‘If that is the case I should say she is not in her room.’

‘But suppose she does happen to be in her room, with the door unlocked?’

‘In that case, when she sees the door opening, or hears it opening, she will probably make a sound of some sort. Then, all we have to do is to return here with all speed, and no one will know who tried her door.’

‘What’s the idea of this?’

‘If my guess is right, I think I know who has borrowed the key of number seventeen.’

‘Stay where you are, there’s no need for us both to go,’ went on Biggles quickly. He crossed over to

the door, opened it quietly, and peeped out into the corridor. With cat-like tread he went on to the door of number fifteen. His hands settled lightly on the brass knob and turned it. Only when it had turned as far as it would go did he put a gentle weight against the door. It opened easily. He peeped inside. A candle was burning near the head of a bed which had not been slept in. Moving quickly but quietly he closed the door and returned to Ginger. ‘It is as I thought,’ he said. ‘She isn’t there. It is a hundred to one that the girl is in number seventeen. I’m just going to make sure.’

‘How?’

‘By trying the door.’

‘You’re taking some chances.’

‘I expected to when I came here.’

Again Biggles opened the door and crept out into the corridor.

With his pulses racing, Ginger watched him from the threshold of their room. There was just enough moonlight from a window at the end of the corridor for him to see Biggles’s form creeping towards his objective. It was only a matter of four or five steps.

Reaching the door of number seventeen, again Biggles’s hands closed lightly over the knob. Slowly he turned it, and pressed gently. But this time he was not so fortunate. The door squeaked. It was only a slight sound, but in the dead silence it was enough to make Ginger catch his

breath. The sound was followed instantly by a faint cry of alarm from inside the room. Quite calmly Biggles closed the door again and came back swiftly down the corridor. Ginger stepped back. Biggles came into the room, but he did not quite close the door; he left it open perhaps half an inch. Motionless he stood with an eye to the crack. The silence was such that the ticking of the clock in the entrance hall could be heard distinctly. Then, along the corridor came a sound so faint that a mouse might have made it. Biggles, seeing nothing pass, opened the door a few inches wider and looked out. He was just in time to see a shadowy figure disappear down the stairs that led to the hall. 'She's gone to put the key back,' he whispered, for Ginger's benefit.

Still watching, a moment later the figure reappeared. With no more noise than a shadow it glided down the corridor towards him. He held the door closed while it passed and then looked out again. It was too dark for him to see anything clearly, but the quiet opening and closing of a door, and the sudden ray of yellow candlelight, told him all he wanted to know. He turned to Ginger. 'It was the girl,' he said. 'She's gone back to her room. We have learnt this, anyway; she knows about Beklinder; that can be the only reason for her interest in room number seventeen.'

'She may have overheard the Jew telling us.'

'That is more than likely.'

'Shall I go and get the key of number seventeen?'

'Not now. I think it's dangerous. She may be watching us, and there is no knowing what she might not do. I think I have a better plan.'

Biggles went over to the wall that separated them from the room next door — number seventeen. It was half timbered, but as is usual with such construction the spaces between the beams had been filled with plaster. Satisfied with his inspection he fetched the screwdriver, and after carefully arranging a towel on the floor to catch any loose pieces of plaster that might fall, he began boring a small hole through the wall. Soft as the plaster was it took him some time to complete the task. The screwdriver told him when he was through. He applied his eye to the hole, but, as he expected, the room on the far side was in darkness and he could see nothing, so after plugging the hole with a tiny wad of paper he returned the tool to his rucksack and began to undress. 'That will have to do for today,' he said. 'We shall have to turn in. It's no use overdoing it.'

Ginger yawned. 'I've had about enough for one stretch,' he admitted.

CHAPTER VII

Strange Birds in the Forest

It seemed to Ginger that he had no sooner closed his eyes than he was wide awake again, every nerve alert, listening for a

repetition of the sound which had awakened him. It is not easy to locate a sound when it is heard during sleep, but he retained in his mind a sort of echo of a gentle tap-tap, as if someone had knocked lightly on the door. Indeed, as he raised himself on his elbow and stared into the darkness in the direction of the door, he became so convinced that this was the case that he almost called 'Come in'. But a swift movement from the other bed told him that Biggles was awake, and had evidently heard what he had heard; so he did nothing. Another instant and Biggles was bending over him. 'Keep quiet,' he breathed.

'What is it?' whispered Ginger.

'I think it is somebody in the next room.'

Again came the soft tap — tap; it seemed to come from the wall in which Biggles had bored the hole, and in which direction Biggles now crept.

As Ginger swung his legs out of bed the darkness was pierced by a minute ray of light which started about half-way up the wall which divided their room from number seventeen and lost

itself in a vague halo on the far side. It was immediately blotted out, but Ginger realized that Biggles had uncovered the hole he had made and was now peeping through it into the next room. As only one person could use the spy-hole at a time he continued sitting on the edge of his bed, waiting with lively expectation for the report which he knew Biggles would presently bring him. Several minutes passed, during which absolute silence reigned, before Biggles crept back again 'Take a look,' he breathed.

Ginger made his way silently to the tiny source of the light and applied his eye to the hole. The room into which he found himself looking was not illuminated as brightly as he expected it would be, for which reason it took him some seconds to comprehend fully what was going on. The first thing he made out was the light itself, a small

electric lamp which stood on a bedside table and cast its glow over a section of the room which included part of a sheet-covered bed and a light-coloured object on the floor —

something that moved slowly. Concentrating his attention on this, he soon perceived that it was a human form in night attire; or, to be precise, in a nightdress. At this moment the face looked up, almost as if the owner of it was suspicious of the wall; then it turned down again as the figure continued to pursue what seemed to be a close scrutiny of the polished floor boards. But the brief glimpse of the face had been sufficient for Ginger to recognize the girl whose mysterious movements had already aroused their curiosity.

Wonderingly he watched the girl crawl slowly over the floor, examining it inch by inch and occasionally sounding it with her knuckles, making the gentle tapping sound which had awakened him. And while he was still watching he saw the conclusion of this extraordinary performance. The soft tap — tap had suddenly changed its note.

Simultaneously the

girl's movements became more rapid. With something bright which she held in her hand she appeared to be working on one of the boards; then, surprisingly, a section of the floorboards moved slowly upwards, disclosing a black hole some two and a half feet square. The girl's gasp of triumph came distinctly to Ginger as he stepped back and groped for Biggles, whom he knew was standing at his elbow. 'Look!' he breathed, and stood aside to allow Biggles to take his place.

There was another interval of silence. Then Biggles retired to where Ginger was again sitting on the edge of his bed. The ray of light no longer gleamed through the hole. 'She's gone,' he said quietly. 'Having found what she was looking for, she's gone back to her room.'

'You saw the trap-door?' queried Ginger.

'Of course.'

'She must have known it was there.'

'Obviously.'

'She seems to know a lot more about this place than we do.' 'I had already suspected that.'

'There must be a subterranean passage under the hotel. Where does it lead to, that's the question.'

It can hardly be a subterranean passage because it's on the first floor,' murmured Biggles. 'But we shall know more about it when we've explored it. This girl is certainly making things complicated, but I am beginning to feel that she is working on parallel lines to ourselves; if she is we might both do better to compare notes, but I must confess that I jib at the idea of approaching her direct. She is suspicious of us as it is. Well, I'm afraid we can't do any more about it at the moment. What's the time?' Biggles reached for his watch. 'Quarter to six,' he

continued. 'We haven't had much sleep, but a little is better than nothing; I don't think it's worthwhile going back to bed; it's just beginning to get light. I'm anxious to turn that pigeon loose. I shall breathe more freely when that's done.'

'Is there any reason why we shouldn't go along right away?' 'It's early to be about — a bit too early for normal tourists.' 'What about getting out of the window?'

Biggles shook his head. 'We mustn't do too much of that,' he argued. 'It would be better if we used the door, except in cases of emergency. Let's lie down for a bit; I'll have a cigarette and think things over. Then we'll take our time getting dressed and so arrive downstairs at a reasonable time. There will be nothing suspicious about it then if we go for a hike.'

'Good enough, chief.' Ginger threw himself back on his bed, and with his hands under his head stared unseeingly at the spiral of Biggles's cigarette smoke as he turned over in his mind the events that had occurred since their arrival in Unterhamstadt. Not the least remarkable thing about the girl was her vague resemblance to somebody whom he knew, he pondered. That this was not merely imagination was borne out by the fact that Biggles had thought the same thing. Which meant that it was somebody known to both of them. Yet who could it be? They knew very few women. Was it a film star whose face had become familiar by constant publication in newspapers and magazines? No, he decided. Yet just behind his consciousness was the link which he felt was there but could not grasp. Then, quite suddenly, it came to him. He knew. He did not know how he knew

— but he knew. And the knowledge sent him bolt upright on the bed. 'Jumping rattlesnakes!' he gasped aloud. 'I think I've got it!'

Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'Got what?'

'That girl.'

'What about her?'

'I know who she's like — or am I crazy?'

'Tell me, and I'll give you my opinion.'

'Beklinder!'

Biggles stiffened. His eyes opened wide and an extraordinary expression swept over his face. Then, with a single movement, he was on his feet. 'You're right,' he snapped. 'That's it. Beklinder. That's the likeness. It's more a similarity of expression, though, than a likeness of the features.' Biggles paced up and down the room in his agitation. 'Can it be coincidence? Is it possible?'

'It might be,' murmured Ginger dubiously.

'Surely not. Hang it all, there must be a limit even to coincidence,' muttered Biggles impatiently.

'Did the people at home say anything about Beklinder having a daughter?'

'No — nor any other relation except his wife.'

'It couldn't be his wife, I suppose?'

'Of course not. This girl can't be a day more than twenty. No, if Beklinder had a daughter then he was unaware of it, of that I'm certain.'

'Why should he tell anybody — even if he knew?'

'On the other hand, why not? What need was there for secrecy? He told the Foreign Office everything about himself. Why conceal the fact that he had a daughter — if he had one? Unless — unless — yes, that may be the answer. It might have been a trap to get him here. Ginger, I feel that we're on the scent of something, and we're getting warm.'

There is only one thing to do; I'm going to find a way of getting into conversation with that girl. It's a risk, but it's worth taking. She knows something that might be invaluable to us, and I'm going to find out what it is. How goes the time? Nearly half-past six. Let's get dressed; it

will be after seven by the time we get down. We'll free the pigeon and then try to make contact with the girl. That's our plan for the moment.'

Ginger said no more, and they set about their toilet. As there was no hot water available, shaving took rather longer than usual, and the clock in the hall had struck seven by the time they were ready to move off. But early as it was, footsteps and the rattle of crockery told them that the hotel staff was already afoot.

Biggles opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Ginger followed, and as they stood there an old, cheerful-looking chambermaid came along carrying a pile of dirty linen over her arm.

'Guten morgen,' Biggles greeted her cheerfully, but his eyes were on one of the sheets which the woman was trailing over her arm. Clearly imprinted on it was a footmark. He made a grimace. 'What!' he exclaimed. 'Do your guests go to bed in their boots?'

The old woman frowned. 'That young gad-about does, it seems,' she declared. 'Twice this week I've had to change her sheets.' She nodded towards the door of the only other guest in the hotel, which was, of course, that of the girl. 'I don't know when she sleeps at all,'

she continued. 'She goes to bed late and she's gone off this morning already.' With a sniff that expressed strong disapproval of such behaviour the woman swept on down the corridor and round the corner. They could hear her heavy footsteps going down the stairs.

'Quick,' snapped Biggles, and made a dash for the girl's room, the door of which had been left wide open. 'Keep cave,' he said, tersely, and disappeared inside.

Within two minutes Ginger could hear the chambermaid returning. 'Cave!' he hissed, just loud enough for Biggles to hear.

Biggles rejoined him, and they walked on down the corridor just as the old woman came in sight carrying a supply of clean sheets. The proprietor was sweeping the entrance hall when they reached it, and Biggles asked if it was too early for coffee. On receiving a reply in the negative he sat down at one of the small tables to await its arrival.

'Well, did you learn anything?' asked Ginger, pulling up a chair.

'A little,' replied Biggles. 'Anyway, we've laid the ghost that gave you such a fright in the churchyard.'

`You mean — it was the girl?'

Of course. She used one of the sheets off her bed to play the part — and trod on it, probably when she was running away from us.'

`What was her idea, I wonder?'

`Much the same as ours, I should say.'

`What did you see in her room — anything interesting?'

`Yes. The room had been tidied up, and in the short time at my disposal I hadn't much time for Sherlock Holmes stuff. The flashlamp was on her bedside table — a natural place for it, I suppose — and a book. The title caught my eye. It was A History of Unterhamstadt from the Earliest Times, a sort of guide book, but a very old one, one that might be difficult to pick up in the ordinary way, but easy enough in a local second-hand bookshop. There was a bookmark in it, so I had a quick look to see what she had been reading. The particular chapter was about the castle, and she had been indiscreet enough to make a pencil mark against a special paragraph. I could well understand it interesting her.

I can't remember the actual words, but it was something to the effect that legend claims that in the bad old days underground passages connected the castle with the hostelry and the monastery of San Stefan, the site of which has been lost.'

Ginger started. 'By gosh!' he exclaimed. 'I was right about that passage in Number Seventeen. It must go underground to the castle.'

Biggles nodded. 'I don't think there is much doubt about it. That trapdoor must open into a passage that goes right through the room below — or maybe there is a concealed closet, or double walls. They were experts at that sort of thing years ago.'

`The girl must have learned of the existence of it from the book.'

`Probably, but I could see nothing in the paragraph to indicate where the passage began.

In fact, according to the book, the underground passage story was only a legend. Yet she evidently knew where to look for it. At any rate, she found it. That could hardly have been luck. How did she know the entrance was in number seventeen? That takes a bit of explaining, doesn't it? As we have already agreed, this young lady

knows as much about this place as the proprietor — if not more.'

'The thing is certainly getting into a bit of a tangle.' 'It is sorting itself out fairly well, I think.'

'Where on earth could she have gone so early?'

Àh! That's something — ssh! Here comes the coffee.'

The same waiter who had served them with supper set a tray of coffee and rolls on the table between them, and on these they now focused their attention, although only a few minutes were needed to consume them.

'Well, it is certainly a grand morning,' murmured Biggles, as they closed the door of the hotel behind them and went off down

the road in the direction of the wood in which they had concealed the pigeon basket.

Overhead the sky was a dome of unbroken blue towards which the wooded hills rose sharply from misty valleys. The air was sweet and fresh, faintly tintured with the refreshing perfume of pines, while over all hung the pleasing silence of an unspoilt countryside.

For some time they walked without speaking, Biggles deep in thought, pondering over the problems that confronted them. and Ginger hesitating to interrupt; but reaching a bend Biggles stopped, and after a quick glance up and down the road, entered the dim aisles of the fir forest on their right. 'I think we can cut through here to reach the place,'

he said, and again they walked on, their feet making no sound on the soft carpet of generations of fir needles. Except for an occasional rabbit which scuttled across their path, or a squirrel that eyed them inquisitively from a tree. the forest appeared to be deserted, although larger tracks, which Biggles said he thought were those of wild boar, were sometimes discernible. From the point where they had entered the forest to the place where they had concealed the pigeon was, they agreed. about two miles, and they had covered half this distance when Biggles said quietly, 'Has it struck you as odd, that although we continually hear birds we never see one?'

Ginger looked up sharply, realizing that there was more behind the words than casual observation. 'Now you mention it. I have noticed it,' he answered. 'The birds seem to be calling and answering each other.'

'Precisely,' said Biggles dryly. 'And although birds of a species have the same note, there is a curious similarity with these. Quite apart from which, although I do not profess to be an ornithologist, I know of no bird that makes such a peculiar whistle.'

'You think they are not birds?' said Ginger quietly.

It may be alarming myself unnecessarily, but it is my opinion that we are being followed,

'declared Biggles. 'Keep walking, and on no account behave as if we suspected anything.

,

'Crikey!' muttered Ginger. 'Hadn't we better confirm this before we go anywhere near the pigeon?'

'We most certainly must,' Biggles told him. 'Do what I do.'

For a little while they strolled on, remarking loudly about the trees, and the forest generally, as if they were walking aimlessly. Once Biggles picked up a fir cone and threw it at a grey squirrel, and they both laughed as it bolted higher into the tree. Then,

This way,' said Biggles softly, and they turned down into a small dell-hole, one side of which was fringed with a thick clump of holly. 'Let's sit down here,' he went on. 'We may see something. Sit still and behave naturally.' He took out a small sketching block, which he had brought with him to support his claim of being an artist, and began making a sketch of a glade which could be seen beyond the far side of the dell. Almost at once came the whistle on which Biggles had remarked, to be answered by another some distance farther on. Even making allowances for imagination, Ginger felt that there was something unnatural about them.

Five minutes passed, and then his muscles tensed, and he turned his eyes to the rim of the dell just above them and to their right. Something was coming. Biggles, too, was watching. A moment later a dog appeared on the rim. It was an Alsatian. It pulled up dead when it saw them, gazing down with keen, intelligent eyes. And while it stood watching them in a manner curiously and unpleasantly human, making no attempt to approach nearer, the whistle, now very close, echoed through the quiet aisles of the forest. Instantly the hound turned and disappeared.

Biggles glanced at Ginger, laid a finger on his lips, and went on sketching. Again for a short time there was silence. Then, not far away, two men carried on a conversation in low tones. Again silence. Presently a twig snapped, and Ginger felt his skin creep, knowing that in the apparently deserted forest men were moving about for a purpose that was not difficult to guess. Biggles was proceeding with his sketch as if he had neither seen nor heard anything. Then a movement caught Ginger's eyes. Without speaking he touched Biggles on the knee, keeping his eyes fixed on the object. A broad figure in the sinister uniform of a storm-trooper was walking slowly across the glade, looking about him intently as he crossed the open space. Ginger noticed that his shirt was not brown, as he had supposed it to be, but a dark greeny-grey. Somewhere a little distance away another twig cracked. A bird whistled.

Ginger looked at Biggles, alarm in his eyes. 'This is a bit trying,' he breathed. 'They seem to be all round us.'

'Yes, but I think they've lost us, temporarily at any rate,' returned Biggles. 'We can only sit still for a bit and hope that they lose us altogether. By hook or crook we have got to get to that pigeon; but if we're seen with it—' He broke off and made a grimace.

After that neither spoke for some time. Twenty minutes, which seemed to Ginger like an hour, passed, during which time there had been no sound beyond an occasional whistle in the far distance.

'I think we might risk getting a bit nearer,' said Biggles quietly, rising to his feet. 'In any case, so far there has been nothing definitely suspicious about our actions, so even if we are seen I do not see how we can be accused of anything.'

'You don't think they were actually looking for us to arrest us?'

'No. I think it is more likely that they received information that we were at the hotel, and decided that they had better keep an eye on us while we were here.'

They walked on, not directly towards their objective, but on a meandering course which, nevertheless, took them ever nearer to it; and, in this way, without seeing anything more of the storm-troopers, they came to within sight of the edge of the forest, on the side where they had first entered it to conceal their parachutes and the pigeon basket.

I think we've struck the edge a bit too far down. Bear to the right a bit,' said Biggles softly. His manner was inconsequential, but his eyes were never still for a moment. 'Yes, that's the place, just ahead,' he went on a few minutes later. 'There's the holly bush. There is no desperate hurry now we're so close. I think it might be a good thing if we sat down for a little while — in case we are being watched. Keep your eyes and ears open.'

'We used to play games like this when I was in the scouts,' muttered Ginger, sitting down on the soft mat of pine needles. 'I never thought I should be doing it in reality. It's more nervy work than I thought.'

Hardly had he spoken the words when, from between the trees some distance beyond the holly bush which concealed the pigeon basket, appeared an Alsatian, either the one they had already seen, or another. Behind it, carrying its lead, came a storm-trooper. When it first appeared the dog's manner was normal, as if it were merely being taken for a walk.

But suddenly it stopped,

and threw up its head, nostrils twitching. For a moment it remained thus; then, with its muzzle close to the earth it began quartering the ground swiftly. The storm-trooper, seeing the animal's manner change, also became more active, and urged it on in a low, tense voice.

Biggles muttered an exclamation of annoyance. 'It's got our taint,' he said. 'It's no use running. He'll see us if we stand up. We shall do better to sit still and see what the fellow has to say.'

Meanwhile, the storm-trooper had put a whistle into his mouth and sent a fair imitation of the notes of a bird ringing through the forest in a series of short, sharp trills.

Immediately it was answered from several places.

'My goodness! The forest is full of them,' grunted Ginger. 'Look — look!'

There was no need for Ginger to explain his final ejaculation. The Alsatian had suddenly run straight into the holly bush, to reappear at once with the pigeon basket in its mouth, at the same time worrying it furiously, putting its feet on the wickerwork and tearing at it with its teeth.

For a brief moment Ginger prayed that the dog might succeed in

wrenching off the lid, thus allowing the bird to escape; but he was doomed to disappointment. The stormtrooper, seeing what the animal had found, dashed up and snatched the basket away.

'That's done it,' muttered Biggles. 'We've got to get away from here. It will be all up if they find us near that bird.'

He was already on his feet when the drama took another unexpected turn. Running like a deer out of the heart of the forest, panting with exertion and wide-eyed with alarm, came the girl in brown. She swerved like a Rugby player when she saw the storm-trooper and made off in a fresh direction. But the man had seen her and shouted a peremptory order to her to stop. But she ignored it and sped on, her brown dress twisting and turning through the trees like a woodcock. The storm-trooper snatched out his revolver and fired three times, the crashing reports of the shots shattering the silence like thunderclaps. Another storm-trooper appeared higher up the bank and he, too, fired. Whether or not the shots took effect Ginger did not know, for Biggles had grabbed him by the arm, and with a crisp 'Come on', set off at a sprint in the direction opposite to that taken by the girl. As he ran he cut diagonally down the gentle slope that led to the edge of the forest; but he did not emerge into the open; keeping just inside the cover of the trees he ran like a hare parallel with the edge. "Ware rabbit holes," he flung back over his shoulder, a necessary warning, for in places the bank was honeycombed with burrows.

For the best part of a quarter of an hour they ran at racing speed, but then, as there was neither sound nor sign of pursuit, they steadied their pace, and presently slowed down to a fast walk. 'I don't think they're following us,' panted Biggles. 'In fact, I don't think they saw us. That wretched girl showed up at a lucky moment for us, and got all the attention.'

'What swine those storm-troopers must be,' muttered Ginger disgustedly. 'They didn't hesitate to shoot, even at a girl. Did they hit her?'

'I don't think so.'

'They'll credit her with the pigeon affair.'

'Probably. Without wishing her any harm, I hope they do. This business is too serious for gallantry. As far as I'm concerned she'll have to take her luck.'



*The storm-trooper snatched out his revolver
and fired three shots.*

'She must have followed us – or was it a fluke that she happened to be in the same part of the forest as ourselves?'

'I think it's more likely that she deliberately got down early, watched us go out and then followed us. But never mind about that now. We're well out of it, but it's a tragedy about the pigeon. That's our messenger gone west.'

'We look like going west ourselves if we aren't jolly careful,' muttered Ginger. 'They're watching us more closely than I thought. If they find us again they won't take their eyes off us after what has happened.'

'Well, it's something to know that we are being watched,' opined Biggles. 'I had a feeling that things were too quiet to be true. Let's keep going. The farther we get away from here the easier I shall feel.'

'How are we going to get a message home now we've lost the pigeon?'

Algy – I'm afraid it's the only way.'

'That means he'll have to land.'

'Yes, it's unfortunate, but it's vitally important that the information should be got home.

Wait a minute, though, there is just a chance—' Biggles stopped, and taking his map from his pocket studied it closely for a minute or two. 'We daren't risk sending a message by post from Unterhamstadt,' he went on thoughtfully. 'But there is another village about six miles down the valley called Garenwald. We can send a postcard from there to a private emergency address which I know would find Raymond, wording it in such a way that it would convey our meaning without being suspected by the censors at the Lucranian frontier. For instance, if we merely said that the box was empty Raymond would know what we meant. The postcard might get through; after all, there must be hundreds of tourists sending postcards home; in any case, I don't see that it would do any harm. Furthermore, a visit to Garenwald would give us an alibi if we are questioned when we get back to the hotel as to where we have been.'

'All right. Then let's do that,' assented Ginger. 'I have a nasty feeling that we are skating on pretty thin ice, and it would be a pity if, having got as far as this, we couldn't let Raymond know about the Professor.'

'That's how I feel about it,' agreed Biggles, and without further ado set off at a brisk pace along the edge of the forest towards the village he had named.

CHAPTER VIII

Enter Von Stalhein

The sun was fast falling towards the pine-clad hills to the west, when, with dusty shoes, they trudged back into

Unterhamstadt, having carried out their emergency programme of sending home from Garenwald an ordinary picture postcard bearing a message, innocent enough in its context, but significant in its real meaning. They had lunched well at the village restaurant, after which they had strolled about for an hour, staring tourist-fashion at what few features of interest the place had to offer, and generally making themselves conspicuous before starting back, unhurriedly, for their hotel. On the way they had, of course, discussed the situation in its new light. The discovery of the carrier pigeon, the purpose of which would certainly be realized at once by the storm-troopers, had, they agreed, made their task much more hazardous by bringing to the notice of their enemies the fact that a secret agent was in the locality. Indeed, but for the opportune arrival on the scene of the girl in brown, and her incriminating behaviour of resorting to flight even when she was under fire, Biggles was of the opinion that to return to the hotel would have been more than their lives were worth. But in the circumstances he took the view that while they

would unquestionably be regarded with suspicion, the hiding of the pigeon would be credited to the girl.

In any case, it was now clear that their presence had been well noted by the stormtroopers, or whoever was in charge of the secret police of the district, otherwise they would not have been followed when they set off through the forest earlier in the day.

Biggles was inclined to think that there was nothing personal about this; he took the view that any stranger arriving at the hotel would, at once be placed under police surveillance; which, as he pointed out to Ginger, was fairly conclusive proof that something unusual was going on in the district. As far as the girl was concerned, her particular mission — if she had one — remained a mystery, although it was now apparent that she was not on the side of the secret police.

The result of a long debate on the situation was a decision by Biggles to take the risk of returning to the hotel; and the chief factors that guided him were, in the first place, the increased suspicion that would undoubtedly fall on them if they failed to return, which might end in a hue and cry, and secondly, the necessity of remaining in the district in order to keep in touch with Algy and the aeroplane in which lay their only hope of escape from the country when their work was finished. As to what would happen when they walked into the hotel, Biggles had an open mind, for he realized that much depended on whether or not the girl had been hit by the shots fired at her, or captured. Had she been captured she would certainly be forced to speak, in which

case she would at once disclaim all knowledge of the pigeon, and at the same time probably reveal all she knew about the suspicious behaviour of the two Englishmen, such as their visit to the Jew's house and their nocturnal excursion.

Biggles eyed the hotel dubiously as they approached it. 'Well, we shall soon know how we stand,' he murmured, half humorously. 'Behave naturally when we go in, as if nothing unusual had happened. If anyone asks questions we shall just look blank and say that we have walked to Garenwald and back.'

There was no one in the entrance hall when they went in. All was quiet. Biggles glanced through the glass panel of the adjacent dining-room door as they passed it. The dining-room, too, was empty. 'Good! It rather looks as if it's all quiet on the western front,' he murmured, as he took their key from the rack and passed on up the stairs.

They reached their room without seeing anyone, and as Biggles closed the door behind them Ginger sank on his bed with a deep breath of relief. 'Phew! that's better,' he exclaimed, relaxing. 'I don't mind admitting that as you pushed open the front door I had a very nasty moment. There is something about those storm-troopers that gives me the willies — I think it must be the uniform.'

Biggles smiled. 'I was prepared for anything myself,' he confessed. 'The nice tranquil atmosphere was a bit too suggestive of a storm about to break. Even now I am not altogether convinced that things are as calm as appearances would suggest, but we can only go on playing the part of two innocent tourists. I should like to know what happened to that girl, though. If she got back to the hotel — and I don't see where else she could go

—she must be in her room. I noticed that her key was missing from the rack, although it doesn't necessarily follow that she is in the hotel; she might have taken it with her. Well, we'll have a wash, I think, and then go down for a drink while we are waiting for the dinner gong. After that we'll have a conference. I don't think it's much use forming a definite plan until we are satisfied that things here are really as quiet as they seem to be.'

'What about Algy, if he comes over?' asked Ginger quickly.

'Well, as you know, the arrangement was that he was to come over as often as weather permitted, but if he got no signal from us he was to go straight back. Actually, once every two or three days would

probably have been sufficient, but, naturally, he rather feels that he has been left out of things, so he might as well come over. It gives him something to do, apart from which I suppose he is anxious about us — and when one is worried it's beastly having nothing to do. It looks like being a fine night, so no doubt he will come over, but if we are being watched, and I am pretty sure we are, it would be folly to risk spoiling our line of communication for no particular reason. It would be much better to keep clear of the machine until an emergency arises. He'll come over, but getting no signal he will tootle off back again.'

They both washed, and Ginger was drying his hands on the towel, humming quietly to himself as he did so, when, happening to glance through the window down into the courtyard, he stopped dead. The tune died away on his lips. 'Biggles; he said, in a low, tense voice, 'come over here.'

Biggles, sensing danger, was at his side in an instant, eyes probing the twilight courtyard.

Over there on the right, by the garage,' muttered Ginger. 'Isn't that a storm-trooper standing close against the wall — under the steps that lead up to that loft?'

'By thunder! You're right. It is.' Biggles's voice was hard. 'There's another along there by the tool shed — two, in fact. It begins to look as if they waited for us to come in before closing

the ring on us. Stay where you are. Keep away from the window,' he concluded crisply.

Ginger, still watching the man by the garage, heard Biggles go out and close the door quietly behind him.

In two minutes Biggles was back. 'They're all round the hotel,' he said calmly. 'There's one under the tree at the back; I saw him from the window at the end of the corridor.

There are several in the -street near the front door. I'm afraid we've walked into a trap.'

'So what?'

Biggles sat on the edge of Ginger's bed and lit a cigarette. 'As you rightly say — so what?'

he murmured. 'Frankly, I don't see that we can do a thing except stay where we are. It's obvious that we cannot get out of the hotel without being seen, so to do that would only expedite trouble – if it's coming.'

'Then it looks as if they've got us caged, muttered Ginger bitterly.

'I should be a liar if I denied that,' agreed Biggles.

'What are we going to do? Try to shoot our way out?' suggested Ginger.

Biggles smiled faintly. 'We might as well commit suicide where we are,' he said sarcastically. 'We couldn't get through that ring; there are too many of them. Even if we did, we shouldn't get a mile before we were captured, certainly not out of the country.'

We might last the night, but by tomorrow there would be a thousand storm-troopers round the whole district. I'm sorry if I seem depressing, but we must face facts. If we stay where we are there is just a chance —'

'I hate the idea of just sitting here waiting for them to come in and arrest us,' declared Ginger impatiently.

'No more than I do. But force majeure won't help us now.

Indeed, to attempt it would only supply the evidence they need to hang us. Bluff is more likely to get us — hark!

Ginger stiffened as footsteps came down the corridor outside — swift, nervous footsteps.

One could almost sense the agitation of the person who made them. A key jangled in a door. Ginger looked at Biggles questioningly.

'That sounds like the girl — bolting to her room,' whispered Biggles. 'She, too, has evidently seen the gentry outside.'

'This is awful, sitting here doing nothing.'

'Very well. Suppose we take the bull by the horns and stroll downstairs?' said Biggles, with a curious smile. 'No doubt they will come up here and fetch us as soon as they are ready, so we shall lose nothing by going down. Put your passport in your pocket.' And with that he went to the door and opened it.

The corridor was empty. All was silent.

'Let's go down,' said Biggles, closing the door behind Ginger. He put the key in his pocket and walked unconcernedly down the stairs.

The lamp had been lighted in the entrance hall, but the room was empty. Not even the proprietor was at his desk. Biggles walked over to one of the small tables at the far end, and, sitting down, rang the bell. He caught Ginger's eye and winked significantly as he inclined his head slightly towards the window that overlooked the street. It was nearly dark outside, but two vague forms could just be seen.

The proprietor appeared. His manner was nervous, almost to the point of agitation. He looked at Biggles inquiringly.

'À glass of beer and a lemonade,' ordered Biggles.

The proprietor nodded. Ja,' he said. 'You will take them in your room?'

'No, we'll have them here,' Biggles told him.

The man hesitated. He glanced apprehensively towards the door, and then started visibly as a powerful car came slowly to a standstill outside with a faint squeak of brakes.

'Is there any difficulty about having a drink before dinner?' asked Biggles evenly.

'Nein – nein.' The proprietor, now pale in his embarrassment, after another furtive glance towards the door, hurried from the room.

'I wish somebody would throw a bomb, or do something,' growled Ginger. 'This sitting here doing nothing is like waiting for a parachute to open.'

'Don't be in a hurry,' Biggles told him smoothly. 'Just keep calm and let things take their time. There will be plenty of action presently, if I know anything about it – ah! This is where the play begins, I fancy.'

Biggles's eyes were on the front door. Ginger, following them, saw that it was slowly opening. Suddenly it was pushed wide open, and a grey-shirted storm-trooper entered the hall. He glanced around swiftly, allowed his eyes to rest for a moment on Biggles and Ginger, and then said something in a low voice to somebody behind him. Three more troopers followed him into the room. The last one closed the door behind him. The first, who appeared to be the leader, spoke again, quietly, and then, his black field boots squeaking, strode over to the key rack. It seemed that one glance told him what he wanted to know.

He gave an order and walked briskly towards the staircase. The other three followed him in single file.

As the four men disappeared from sight Ginger turned startled eyes to Biggles. 'What the deuce—?'

There was a queer expression on Biggles's face. 'Sit tight,' he said, through his teeth. 'I don't think they're here for us, after all.' 'You mean — the girl?'

Biggles nodded.

`What do we do?'

`Nothing.'

`But the girl?'

`That's her affair. We've enough troubles of our own without indulging in any fancy knight-errantry at this stage.'

The sound of insistent knocking now came from upstairs. There was a crash, followed by a sharp cry of fear, cut short by what was unmistakably the noise of a struggle. A moment later the sinister sounds approached the head of the stairs. A treble voice began crying out, shrilly.

`Sit quite still and appear to take no notice,' ordered Biggles firmly.

Ginger leaned back in his chair, but his eyes were on the stairs. And as he watched a strange procession came into view — four storm-troopers, holding between them the girl in brown, who struggled violently and kept up what were obviously alternate cries of appeal and abuse.

As the party reached the foot of the stairs the girl's eyes fell on the other two guests, still sitting at their table. 'Spies! Spies!' she screamed in English, struggling with such violence that she almost broke free. And in the struggle an extraordinary thing happened.

Her blonde hair suddenly came away and fell to the ground, disclosing a dark, close-cropped head. Curiously enough, this appeared to cause no surprise to the stormtroopers, for one of them, with a grim smile, snatched it up before taking a fresh hold on the prisoner.

`Swine — swine — murderers!' screamed the prisoner, in German. 'You murdered my father. I know — I know! You killed him. Cowards —' The prisoner was bundled through the door. It was slammed, but the cries could still be heard outside.

Biggles had not moved a muscle. 'Not a pretty scene,' he said in a low voice. 'Still, we have learned something from it. So it wasn't a girl, after all — but our guess was not far wrong.'

`It is Beklinder's son.'

`Ssh! That's how I read it. The story begins to unfold. What a pity we did not know before — but there, it's no use thinking about that now.'

Outside the cries had ended abruptly. The hotel proprietor came into the room with the drinks which Biggles had ordered on a tray. 'There has been a little trouble,' he said, setting the tray down shakily, 'but it is over now.'

Biggles made a deprecatory gesture with his hand. 'These things will happen,' he said casually.

ja, they will happen,' agreed the proprietor, obviously relieved at Biggles's attitude, and, with yet another glance at the door, hurried away.

Biggles had picked up his glass, and was in the act of raising it to his lips, when the front door opened again, and a man in a dark uniform entered. He was obviously of superior rank. From where he was sitting Ginger could not see his face, but he saw Biggles stiffen.

The man strode straight to the reception desk and struck the bell.

The hotel proprietor almost fell into the room, bowing and scraping as he came when he saw his visitor. His agitation now was almost ludicrous.

The new-comer asked a question, sharply. There was a ring of authority in his voice.

The proprietor answered, and although he spoke in German Ginger caught two words which gave him a fair idea of what the question had been. The two words werè Bigglesworth' and Hebblethwaite', from which he assumed that the new-comer had asked for the names of the other guests in the hotel.

The proprietor's reply had a curious effect on the new-comer. He swung round on his heels and raised a monocle to his right eye.

Ginger recognized him instantly and went cold all over. It was Erich von Stalhein, one-time German Intelligence agent on the Imperial Staff, now chief of the Lucranian Secret Police, officially known as the Grospu.

For perhaps half a minute von Stalhein stood stock still, regarding the two Englishmen with an expression which changed rapidly from

incredulity to something like amused reproach. 'Well, well, well, my dear Major Bigglesworth — and, yes, it is our young friend with the difficult name,' he said cheerfully, in faultless English. 'Tch-tch-tch.

Believe me, I had no idea that you had honoured us with a visit.'

'I can well believe that,' said Biggles smiling. 'Won't you sit down and have a drink?'

'Still as courteous as ever — yet there are people who say that the English are a rude race,' murmured von Stalhein, advancing towards them.

Biggles pulled up another chair. 'What can I order for you?' he said evenly.

'Perhaps — yes — a cognac.'

'À cognac,' Biggles called to the proprietor, who hastened to obey the order.

Ginger looked with fascinated interest at the man whom he knew was their deadliest enemy. His hair was slightly greyer at the temples, otherwise he was unchanged since he had last seen him. The same slim figure; the same keen, alert, handsome face; the same cold eyes; immaculate, the same half-foppish manner; the same hard, grimly humorous expression.

The proprietor brought the brandy and placed it on the table. His eyes were round with wonder, and it seemed to Ginger that he regarded them with a new respect.

Von Stalhein raised his brandy glass; his eyes, like bluey-grey steel, gleamed coldly just above the brim. He murmured the German national toast *Prosit*!.

Biggles picked up his half empty glass. *Prosit*,' he echoed seriously.

'And you have been here — how long?' asked von Stalhein, replacing his glass on the table.

'We arrived last night,' Biggles told him.

'Just a friendly visit to see this beautiful country?'

'Of course — what else?'

Of course — of course,' almost crooned von Stalhein, but there was an undertone of subtle sarcasm in the way he said the words. 'But for mere chance, an extraordinary coincidence, I should have been here last night to welcome you,' he went on suavely. 'I am staying not far away, so naturally I take a great interest in all our visitors —

particularly English people, for whom, as you know, I have a great regard. Notice of all new arrivals is sent straight up to me, but yesterday morning I had to go at a moment's notice to Prenzel, so I was unaware that you were here. As a matter of detail, I have only just returned. It happened that I had to call in here on my way home, to attend to — well, no doubt you saw what happened here just now. An unfortunate business.'

'Very unfortunate for the girl — or rather, boy,' observed Biggles dryly.

'A boy masquerading as a girl,' declared von Stalhein. Ginger nearly gasped aloud as he continued, with surprising frankness, 'You know, we had an unfortunate accident here a short time ago. Perhaps you remember it. One of the people of this country, but long resident in England, came here on a visit — you may recall the affair, for I believe it was noted in your newspapers.'

Biggles wrinkled his forehead. 'I seem to remember something about it,' he said. 'What was the name?'

'Beklinder — Professor Beklinder,' prompted von Stalhein smoothly.

'Ah, yes. That was it,' nodded Biggles. 'I remember now.'

'He was driving his own car; approaching the village he collided with a lorry and was killed. He had a son in the country, and unfortunately the shock affected his brain, so it became necessary to keep him under observation in a nursing home. Due to the carelessness of his — er—'

'Keepers,' suggested Biggles.

Von Stalhein pursed his lips. 'That is a hard word, but we will call it that if you like. At any rate, the boy escaped, and by disguising himself as a girl, with an ingenuity I should not have believed possible, succeeded in reaching this place, presumably in the hope of carrying out investigations on his own account —although why he should question the coroner's verdict is more than I can understand.' Von Stalhein shrugged his shoulders.

`Remarkable.' There was the faintest suspicion of a sneer in Biggles's voice.

`As you say, remarkable,' murmured von Stalhein imperturbably.

`Possibly the boy had arranged to meet his father, and was disappointed that he did not see him before the accident?' suggested Biggles.

`Naturally.'

`Had the boy arranged to meet his father?'

Von Stalhein hesitated for a moment. 'There is no secret about the affair,' he went on casually. 'There is reason to believe that the unfortunate Professor, who often stayed here in his young days, arranged to meet the boy in this very hotel; he was on his way here, and had, in fact, nearly reached his destination when he was killed.'

`Very sad. Very, very sad,' said Biggles, in a melancholy voice. `Do you intend to stay long?' inquired von Stalhein, suddenly twisting the trend of the conversation.

`No, there does not appear to be anything of particular interest here,' murmured Biggles. '

Still, I am glad we came this way or we should have missed seeing you.'

Von Stalhein nodded. 'It would be wise, I think, if you moved on,' he said. 'In some curious way this seems to be an ill-fated place for visitors — particularly English visitors. There have been two or three accidents lately.'

`Accidents?'

`Yes, not long ago — since the Professor was killed — an English tourist — actually an employee of your Foreign Office on holiday, I believe — was climbing about on the rocks near the castle when he fell and fractured his skull.'

`Do you live at the castle, by any chance?' inquired Biggles blandly.

Von Stalhein almost smiled. 'Yes, as a matter of fact, I have had a wing made habitable and use it as a shooting-box,' he admitted, with disarming frankness. 'You may have time to come up and see me

before you leave. You may be sure I will do my best to make you welcome.'

'I am sure you will,' nodded Biggles pleasantly.

Von Stalhein finished his cognac and glanced at his wrist watch. 'I must be getting along,

' he said rising. 'There are some urgent matters that need my attention.' He bowed stiffly from the waist. But instead of going he appeared to hesitate, regarding Biggles quizzically. 'You know, Bigglesworth,' he said, in a curious voice, 'there are moments when I could wish that you were on my staff.'

'Coming from you, von Stalhein, I appreciate the compliment.'

Von Stalhein nodded slowly, almost sadly. 'I even find myself regretting that you came to Lucrania.'

'Come, come,' protested Biggles. 'Surely it is a little early to talk of regrets?'

'You have a saying, "The pitcher that goes most often to the water in the end gets broken."'

Biggles smiled. 'We have another which says, "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."'

Von Stalhein smiled, but there was no humour in his eyes. He bowed again. His heels clicked together. 'Good-bye — for the time being,' he said, and turned towards the door.

Reaching it, he turned again. 'You won't forget that I am looking forward to seeing you again?' he called.

'Whatever else I may forget you may be sure that it won't be that,' answered Biggles.

The German went out, and an instant later his car could be heard speeding up the road.

Biggles moved swiftly. 'We've got about five minutes to get clear,' he said crisply.

'Why didn't he arrest us then?' asked Ginger, who had not for an instant been deceived by the casual cross-talk.

‘He daren't risk it single-handed. He knew that we'd be armed. He's gone off to get his gang of greyshirts. We've got to move quickly.’

‘It means bolting for it?’

‘Yes – but not into the country. Von Stalhein could call up a regiment if he wanted to –

or a whole blessed army corps if it became necessary. He's not going to let us get out of the country if human power can stop us. We've only one chance now that I can see.’

‘What is it?’

The castle.’

‘The castle?’

‘That's it. Von Stalhein lacks one quality and that's imagination. Though he searches the whole country – and he will – there is one place in which he will not expect to find us, and that is in the castle.’

‘But how—?’

‘We've no time to stand talking,’ snapped Biggles. ‘I'll show you. Come on.’

Four swift paces took him to the key rack. He unhooked the key of number seventeen and sped up the stairs; but he did not immediately use the key that he held in his hand.

Instead, he went into their own room and filled his pockets with the most vital articles of their equipment, including the rope which he

took from under the bed. Then he opened the window wide. This done, he went back into the corridor and locked the door of the room on the outside, after which he unlocked the door of number seventeen. He turned to Ginger. ‘Listen carefully,’ he said. ‘This is what you've got to do. Lock me in here. Go down and hang the key in its proper place. Then go out of the front door and come round into the courtyard. I shall be waiting at the window with the rope to pull you up into number seventeen. Hurry! Every second counts.’

Ginger did not question the orders. Biggles had already gone into the forbidden room.

Ginger locked the door and hurried downstairs. The proprietor had

not returned. It was the work of a moment to replace the key on its hook, after which he went quietly out of the front door and walked swiftly round into the courtyard. Biggles was already waiting for him at the open window of number seventeen. 'Lay hold,' he said, dropping an end of the rope. Ginger seized the rope and was hauled up into the room.

'Good!' muttered Biggles, closing the window. 'I think that gives us a good start. If my calculations are right this will be the last room they will search. Hark! Here they come.'

From the road leading to the castle came the sound of a motorcar being driven at high speed.

Biggles took his screwdriver from his pocket and prised up the trap-door. 'This is the way we go,' he said cheerfully.

CHAPTER IX

A Grim Discovery

Ginger stared at the inviting hole, while Biggles, dropping on his hands and knees, turned the beam of the torch into

it. The light revealed a flight of stone steps leading downwards. Ginger almost fell into the hole as there came a rush of heavy footsteps along the corridor.

'It's all right. We've plenty of time now,' said Biggles calmly. 'They'll make for our own room first, and the door being locked will probably hold them up for a minute or two.'

Then, when they find the window open, they'll think we've bolted into the country. Even if they ransack the hotel for us this is the last room they will search.'

As he finished speaking there was a splintering crash which seemed so close that for a dreadful moment Ginger thought that it was the door of the room they were in that was being forced.

'There goes the door,' remarked Biggles. 'We had better get along. You go first — I'll close the trap after us. If my guess is right, the last thing that von Stalhein would imagine is that we know about this bolt-hole,' he added reassuringly.

Taking the torch Ginger went slowly down the steps, peering fearfully in front of him in case there was a sudden drop. He waited until Biggles had closed the trap door, and then handed the torch back to him. Biggles took the lead and went on down. It was not very far. About twenty steps and the descent came to an end, finishing in a gloomy cave, which, from its bricked arches, was obviously artificial. It was damp; in places it was wet, for the moisture had seeped through the roof to fall on a slimy green floor, or into patches of grotesque fungus that clung to the walls.

Biggles examined the floor closely. 'Hm, as I thought,' he said. 'This tunnel has been used recently.'

'You're pretty sure that it goes to the castle?' asked Ginger.

'I can't imagine anywhere else that it would be likely to end.'

'There was mention of a monastery in the book, don't forget.'

'I haven't forgotten that, but if this tunnel goes to the monastery then it is unlikely that the site of the monastery would have been lost. Apparently nobody knows now where the monastery stood. However, we shall soon know where the tunnel ends. Let's go on. Keep close to me and be careful you don't slip on this stuff on the floor. It's like grease. And don't touch the walls; they look pretty rotten to me; we don't want to bring the roof down on us.' Picking his way carefully, Biggles began to walk along the tunnel.

'That was a bit of bad luck, von Stalhein barging in when he did,' observed Ginger, as they proceeded on their way, for the recent events were still running through his mind.

'I don't think it made much difference,' answered Biggles. 'I was an optimist to suppose that we should get a clear week to work in. I should have known von Stalhein better than that. You heard what he said — he has a list of visitors sent up to him every night. He would have known about us before but for the fact that he had to go to Prenzel

— at least, so he said, and I fancy he was telling the truth. No doubt our names were sent up, but as von Stalhein was away the names did not convey anything particular to whoever received them. By jove! Did you see him start when the hotel proprietor told him who was staying in the hotel? That gave him a shock. He was certainly speaking the truth when he said he had no idea that we were here. Maybe it's as well things happened as they did; at least it gave us a

chance to get away. Had he gone to his office and found our names on his desk we shouldn't have got such a chance, you may be sure.'

'I suppose Algy will be on his way by now?' was Ginger's next remark. 'After what has happened it seems a pity that we can't get in touch with him.'

'There's a chance that we may. We'll see how things go, although I imagine that von Stalhein's telephone is buzzing by now.'

'What are the chances of the Professor being at the castle, do you think?'

'Very good. I can't think of any other reason for von Stalhein and his gang being here.'

You can be pretty certain that he would not be down here if he was not handling something very important in the district, and what could be more likely than the Professor?'

'They'll probably take the son up to the castle, too.'

'For the time being, at any rate. It is a great pity we didn't know who he was before, or we might have compared notes. Another few hours and I should have spoken to him —

but there, it's no use thinking of that now.'

'Didn't it strike you as odd that von Stalhein should tell us as much as he did?'

The fact that he did so is pretty conclusive proof that he was certain that we could not get away. Otherwise he would not have been so frank — that is, if it was frankness, and not a cock-and-bull story to mislead us. But somehow I don't think it was.'

They continued on down the tunnel, the only sound being the soft squelch of the slime underfoot, or the sinister drip of water from the roof. In more than one place the brickwork had caved in, leaving the bare earth exposed, and such places they passed with extreme caution, for it seemed not unlikely that a touch, or even the vibration of their footsteps, might cause a collapse with results not pleasant to contemplate.

To Ginger the tunnel seemed interminable, but at long last, after rising steeply for a short distance, it came to an abrupt end at a point where

there had been a more than usually heavy subsidence, beyond which was a massive looking door. barred with iron.

Biggles examined the door closely in the light of the torch, but there was no handle or other means of opening it. Further examination revealed that it opened inwards; that is to say, towards them, but it was prevented from doing so by a heavy lock on the other side, the bolt of which was home. 'I'm afraid there's no getting past that,' he said slowly, still looking at the door.

'We must have arrived at the castle,' suggested Ginger.

'I don't think there is any doubt about that,' replied Biggles. 'I suspected that we were nearing the end when the floor started to slope upwards.'

'What are we going to do?'

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'Obviously, since we can't go on we shall have to go back the way we came '

'We could wait here for awhile. If the tunnel is being used somebody might unlock the door.'

Even so, the door would be locked again, so that wouldn't help us much. Apart from that, we might have to wait here for days, and that is something I don't feel inclined to do.'

'There's absolutely no way of getting the door open?'

'None. I've satisfied myself on that point. If we tried to batter it down we should merely bring everybody in the castle to the spot, so that won't do. I'm afraid it means going back.

There's no particular hurry. In fact, I think our best plan would be to wait for a time to allow the storm-troopers time to search the hotel, and clear off. I think I'll have a cigarette and think things over.'

Biggles took out his cigarette case and sat down on a broad piece of fallen masonry.

Ginger flicked out the torch to save the battery and sat down beside Biggles. Silence fell, utter silence except for the persistent drip — drip — drip of water. And there they sat, while Biggles, his chin cupped in his right hand, and his elbow on his knee, smoked his cigarette. When it was finished he tossed the butt on the floor and ground it into the slime with his heel. But still he did not get up. Another ten minutes

passed and he drew a deep breath.

`Yes, it's all very difficult,' he murmured in a low voice, as if to himself.

Ginger stiffened as a slight sound echoed down the tunnel `Did you hear that?' he breathed.

`I did,' answered Biggles. 'What did it sound like to you?'

`It sounded to me like the trap-door in the bedroom being allowed to drop back into place.'

`And to me. Hark!'

Faintly, so faintly as to be little more than a distant echo, from the direction of the hotel came the low murmur of voices.

`By thunder! Would you believe that?' grated Biggles. `Somebody is coming down the tunnel — and certainly more than one person.'

`They'll find us.'

`Inevitably.'

`We can't go on, and we can't go back without meeting them.'

`Just a minute. Give me the torch.' Biggles took the torch and sprang to his feet. The beam cut a wedge of bright light through the darkness and moved slowly over the highest point of the fallen masonry at the base of which they had been sitting. 'I may be mistaken, but there seems to be some sort of cavity up there,' he went on, tersely.

`You mean on top of the bricks?'

`Yes — but whether it is big enough to conceal us, I don't know. You are lighter than I am; climb up and have a look, but for heaven's sake be careful; don't start a landslide —

and don't make any noise or we shall be heard.'

Ginger took the torch, and with infinite care, on hands and feet, felt his way to the top of the sloping pile of bricks and mortar. Reaching the top he turned the light of the torch into the recess. His voice came down to Biggles in a sibilant hiss. `There's plenty of room. I believe there's another tunnel at the back.'

Biggles crept up the treacherous pile and joined him.

By lying flat they found that they could worm their way through a low cavity that existed between the top of the masonry and the earth above, beyond which there was a recess, the extremities of which the torch failed to reach. Ginger held his breath as he squirmed through, for he had an uneasy feeling that the roof might cave in at any moment and crush him. However, nothing of the sort happened, and Biggles joined him on the other side.

'You're right,' grated Biggles. 'There's another tunnel along there. Ssh, keep still.'

The warning was necessary, because it was clear from the sounds on the far side of the barricade of debris that the other users of the tunnel were nearing the spot. Actually, the sounds were amplified by the silence, and the narrow confines of the tunnel, and it was some time before the newcomers drew level, and halted while a sharp double knock was made on the door. Of whom the party consisted neither Biggles nor Ginger knew, for the masonry obstructed the view and neither dared risk climbing up to look for fear of the movement betraying them. That there were at least two or three people, however, was obvious from the low mutter of voices which echoed weirdly along the tunnel. A bright light gleamed on the roof. They heard the lock turn and the door open. The party moved on again and the door closed with a dull clang. The lock turned. Again silence fell. Water dripped slowly from the roof, like a clock ticking in a bedroom at night.

'Well, they've gone,' breathed Biggles at last. 'Before we think about returning to the hotel I think we'll have a look to see where this tunnel goes, because it may alter the whole situation. I don't know how long it is since that brickwork caved in, but I shouldn't think any one has used this tunnel since. With luck it might take us to another exit. They made regular labyrinths under these old castles; it was all a part of the stratagem in medieval times.' As he spoke he began to grope his way forward.

The tunnel in which they now found themselves was a good deal narrower than the previous one; indeed, it could more correctly be called a corridor than a tunnel. Presently a short flight of steps led upward, and Ginger noted that the walls were no longer of brick, but of stone. Further, the floor and roof were dry. Shortly afterwards, to his surprise, the stone wall on the left-hand side, along which he had been groping with his hand, gave way to wood. Biggles had

apparently noticed this, too, for he had stopped, and was examining it, section by section, in the light of the torch.

As Ginger watched breathlessly he became aware of something else; it was a confused murmur, almost a hum. For a moment it puzzled him, then he realized what it was. It was a human voice speaking rapidly beyond the wooden partition. He turned questioning eyes to Biggles. 'We must be in the castle,' he whispered.

Biggles nodded.

Ginger turned his attention again to the partition. Close against his feet was a square stone, not unlike a milestone, or one of the 'mounting' stools which are still sometimes to be found outside old road-houses, and which were used in days gone by to enable horsemen to mount more easily. On this Ginger climbed, and placed his ear to the woodwork in a vague hope that he might be able to hear what was being said. But in this position he was not very steady, and he reached up with his left hand to a small, oblong panel of wood which he thought might help him to maintain his balance. The movement was purely instinctive, and he had no other motive, so he was entirely unprepared for what happened next. The wooden panel, instead of being a fixture, as he had naturally supposed, was fixed to the wall only at one end, so that under the pressure of his hand it moved bodily, as on a pivot, so that he nearly lost his balance.

Startled, but retaining his perch with an effort, he turned his eyes upwards, and was astounded — and not a little alarmed — to see a beam of yellow light pouring through a small round hole in the wall. Simultaneously, the sound of talking changed from a distant hum to a comparatively clear conversation.

For perhaps ten seconds he could only stare at the hole in utter amazement. Then, slowly, with his body pressed close to the wooden panelling, he raised his eyes to the level of the hole.

The room into which he found himself staring with bated breath was a magnificently appointed hall, or dining-room, although it was now furnished as an office. So much he realized subconsciously, for he did not examine it in detail, his eyes being drawn irresistibly to a huge carved desk in the centre of the room, and four men who were disposed about it. Electric light revealed the scene clearly.

Behind the desk, in a high-backed chair carved in the same manner, was Erich von Stalhein. Standing facing him on the other side of the

desk were two grey-shirted stormtroopers. Between them was a man in a leather flying jacket, obviously a prisoner. It was Algy.



It was Algy.

CHAPTER X

Von Stalhein Plays

a Trump Card

Algy's voice reached them clearly. It was coldly dispassionate.

'Perhaps you will explain the meaning of this,' he said.

'Surely the boot is on the other foot, as you English say,' returned von Stalhein, studiously polite. 'I await your explanation as to why you, knowing well the international regulations, make an illegal and surreptitious landing in a foreign country.'

Algy's answer was a revelation to the listeners behind the panelling. 'I landed because your gang of thugs signalled to me to do so,' he answered icily.

'I quite appreciate that when you landed your surprise at finding my men waiting for you must have been complete. Why dissemble, Captain Lacey? You expected to find your friends. Oh yes, I knew all about them coming here. I was waiting for them when they arrived, so they, like you, are under arrest,' lied von Stalhein easily.

Ginger, quivering with rage, was tempted to throw the lie back at the German, but prudence prevailed and he restrained himself.

'You seem to know all about it,' said Algy, with more than a suspicion of a sneer in his voice.

'It is my business to know,' purred von Stalhein.

'Where are my friends now?'

'You came here to answer questions, not to ask them,' von Stalhein pointed out coldly.

'Well, I'm answering no questions,' grated Algy.

'My dear Captain Lacey, your discourtesy pains me,' murmured von Stalhein sardonically. 'Why not be frank? I can be frank with you. Would you not be interested to hear the circumstances that have resulted in your arrival here?'

'Go ahead,' invited Algy. 'I'm not stopping you.'

'You see, it was like this,' went on von Stalhein smoothly. 'Immediately it was known that your friend the Major was here, it was quite obvious that two accessories could not be far away. The first was yourself, and the other, an aeroplane. Naturally, it required no great

mental effort to deduce that the aeroplane, with Unterhamstadt as its objective, would operate from a point as conveniently near as possible; so friends of mine, who have control of such things, immediately broadcast a radio message to all those who work for us outside our country, asking if a British aeroplane, with a crew of three, had been observed on their particular aerodrome. By this means we were able to establish the base from which you were operating. A straight line drawn from there to Unterhamstadt on the map gave us the probable line of flight of the aeroplane. The rest was easy. An extremely delicate sound detector — our latest invention in this department, by the way

— picked you up. As your friends were already here we knew that it could only be you flying the machine. After that I simply posted men at all available landing-grounds within

a reasonable area, and when you arrived over that nice plain so conveniently near Unterhamstadt, they, acting on my instructions, flashed a message that you were to land.

It was obvious, even to my limited intelligence, that such an arrangement must exist between you and your accomplices on the ground — unless, of course, you were both equipped with wireless apparatus, which I could not believe. But the ruse worked. So you see, it was all perfectly simple.'

And, as he stated it, so it seemed, thought Ginger, appalled by the cunning way in which the German had anticipated and countered their plan.

'Well, having flattered your vanity by letting me know how clever you are, what are you going to do about it?' asked Algy nonchalantly.

Von Stalhein was lolling back in his chair, his monocle in place, smoking a cigarette held in a long holder. It was obvious that he was enjoying the situation. 'You know, Captain Lacey,' he went on, ignoring Algy's question, 'great as is the admiration I have for your friend Major Bigglesworth, I fear that on this occasion he has committed a grave error of judgement in undertaking a task beyond his capacity. It is a pity.'

'Must I stand here and listen to you patting yourself on the back?' growled Algy belligerently. 'Don't laugh too loudly. Unless you have already killed him, Bigglesworth will give—'

Von Stalhein interrupted him with a short laugh. 'I shall take no risks,

of that you may be sure,' he murmured. 'Is there anything more you wish to say? When it was reported to me that you had been brought in, naturally I felt obliged to accord myself the honour of renewing our acquaintance.'

'What you really wanted to do was to gloat,' declared Algy bluntly. 'Well, have your little gloat while the going's good. It's time you knew that you won't have it all your own way all the time.'

'Silence!' Von Stalhein's pose broke under the strain of Algy's contemptuous jibe. He sat bolt upright in his chair, eyes flashing coldly, lips pressed together in a straight line. He barked an order. The grey-shirted storm-troopers took Algy by the arms and marched him from the room. The door slammed behind them.

Ginger continued to watch von Stalhein, who began to pace up and down the room with his head bowed in thought. His manner was by no means so assured as it had been for Algy's benefit, and Ginger guessed the reason. He and Biggles were still at large, although the information the German had volunteered to Algy was to the contrary, and he was worried about it. For a minute he continued pacing up and down; then, as if he had suddenly reached a decision, he sat down again and pressed a bell on his desk. The door was opened immediately by a storm-trooper. Von Stalhein rapped out a curt order, of which Ginger caught one word — 'Beklinder'. He turned away from the spy-hole. 'I believe he has sent for the Professor,' he whispered.

Biggles moved Ginger aside and took his place. A few seconds later a man whom he had never seen, but whom he recognized instantly, was brought into the room by a single guard. It was Professor Beklinder.

Von Stalhein dismissed the guard and pulled out a chair near the desk with an exaggerated exhibition of courtesy. 'Sit down, Professor,' he said.

'I prefer to stand,' replied the Professor bitterly.

'And you would prefer to speak in English?'

'That is my own language.'

'You are English only by naturalization.'

'Have you brought me here again to reopen this fatuous argument?'

Von Stalhein allowed his monocle to drop from his eye. He settled

himself back in his chair. 'No,' he said, 'I brought you here to congratulate you on your wisdom in bowing to the inevitable. Believe me, Professor, I was delighted for your sake when I was told that you were at last working and exercising your unique talents in the laboratory which my government has provided for you.'

'You may have been delighted, but it was certainly not for my sake.'

'Let us not quibble about that. You have, I am told, made a small quantity of the — er —

mixture, in which we are interested.'

The Professor took a small round bottle from his pocket, and holding it up to the light turned it so that a yellow oily liquid with which it was about half filled crept sluggishly towards the other end of the receptacle. 'Yes, no doubt this will interest you,' he said. '

The question naturally arises, what are you going to do with me now that I have submitted to your demands and presented you with my formula? You promised that I should be allowed to return to England.'

'Yes, that is true — but not immediately.'

'Why not?'

'There will be certain matters to arrange.'

'Yes, so I suspected,' said the Professor, in a curious voice. 'And no doubt the arrangements will take a very long time to make. In fact, the truth is, you have no intention of allowing me to return to England, have you?'

'You do me an injustice, Professor,' said von Stalhein in a tone of pained reproach.

'I observe that you avoid my question. Will you swear to me on your oath that I am to be allowed to return to England?'

Von Stalhein hesitated.

'No, you will not.' The Professor answered his own question. 'Can you possibly suppose that for one single moment I was deceived by your lies?' he went on quickly, with a rising inflexion in his voice, a flush of anger staining his pale cheeks. 'Can you think that I do not understand your methods — you cheat?'

Von Stalhein rose swiftly to his feet, the corners of his mouth drawn down. 'Such insulting remarks will not help you,' he snapped.

The Professor shook his head sadly. As if anything could have helped me — except perhaps the British government — once I was in your hands. Oh, I had no delusions.

From the moment I knew that I was in your power I realized that I was doomed. It is a bad thing for a man to know that he is doomed, Hauptmann von Stalhein. Bad for him and bad for others, because it moves him to desperate measures. But you, for all your cunning, have made a grave mistake. You put me in a laboratory — me, the inventor of Linderite.' The Professor laughed bitterly. 'I have been very busy in the laboratory, and my work is now complete. But what I have in this bottle is not what you so earnestly seek. Could you think that I should be such a fool?'

'What is it?' jerked out von Stalhein sharply.

'It is an explosive infinitely more powerful than Linderite,' announced the Professor. He almost purred the words as he held up the bottle again and gazed affectionately at the contents.

Von Stalhein's hand crept towards his pocket, but the Professor saw the movement. '

Shoot — shoot by all means,' he said, calmly. 'Doubtless you are aware of what happens when nitro-glycerine

is dropped — or even moved violently. It explodes. I believe the compound which I hold in my hand to be so deadly that any severe vibration — such as would occur if I allowed it to fall — would be sufficient to cause it to detonate. If such a thing occurred I should only have one regret — not that there would be much time for regrets, you understand? I should not live to see exactly how devastating would be the result. But it would be considerable, I assure you. Very little would be left of the castle. As for you and me, why, nothing would remain to show that we had ever been. A fitting end for a research chemist like myself — and for a liar like you.'

During this long oration von Stalhein had lit another cigarette. He puffed at it jerkily, nervously. 'But why do you call me a liar, Professor?' he asked.

'You brought me here, to Lucrania, by appealing to a man's most primitive instinct —

paternity.'

'You came here entirely on your own initiative in order to meet your son.'

'The whole thing was a plot arranged by you.'

Von Stalhein shook his head. 'I am sorry that you should so misjudge me,' he said mournfully. 'Naturally, I did not want to take your mind off your work. The pleasure of meeting your son I reserved until your work was finished.'

'You persist in the deception?'

'It is no deception, Professor. Your son is here now.'

The Professor turned questioning eyes to von Stalhein. 'It would be a simple matter to prove that,' he said.

Von Stalhein smiled as he reached for the bell. 'You shall have proof immediately,' he promised.

A storm-trooper answered the summons. Von Stalhein gave an order, and as the trooper retired he got up and came round the

desk towards the Professor. 'My dear Professor,' he said silkily, 'In a few moments you will be apologizing for the hard names you have called me.'

'I will reserve my judgement till then,' was the curt rejoinder.

The door was flung open again and the storm-trooper reappeared. With him was the pseudo-girl in brown who had been at the hotel, now in masculine attire. The boy stopped dead when he saw his father; then, with a glad cry, he ran forward, arms outstretched.

The Professor's hand trembled as he stood the bottle on von Stalhein's desk. He was staring at his son, so he did not see von Stalhein, with a swift movement, pick up the bottle and place it on a shelf in a full-length safe that stood against the wall.

Father and son spoke quickly in tones so low that Biggles could not catch the words, although he heard the boy make some reference to his mother. They spoke for some time, but at last von Stalhein interrupted. 'Well,' he said.

The Professor swung round. There were tears in his eyes and his face was working with emotion. His embarrassment was almost painful to see. 'I apologize,' he said huskily. '

This is my son.'

Von Stalhein's manner changed abruptly. 'Very well,' he said coolly. 'The interview has lasted long enough. You will now return to your rooms — you, Professor, until you have completed what is required of you.'

'Am I not to be allowed to see my son?'

'Afterwards.'

The Professor seemed to come suddenly to himself. His eyes went to the desk. 'Where is the bottle?' he asked.

'Where it can do no harm,' von Stalhein told him mockingly. The Professor nodded slowly. 'So,' he said, 'again you have been too clever for me.'

Von Stalhein shrugged his shoulders. 'I trust that you now have an incentive to be more obliging,' he murmured.

The Professor bowed. 'I understand perfectly,' he said.

The storm-trooper parted father and son and ordered them to follow him. They went without a backward glance and the door closed behind them.

Von Stalhein sank down in his chair. There was a curious smile on his lips as he reached for the telephone. He spoke briefly. A few moments later an unterofficier of the stormtroopers appeared and, marching with military precision to the desk, saluted.

'The two Englishmen?' said von Stalhein crisply. 'Is there any news yet?'

'Nein, Herr Commandant.'

'Why not?'

'We cannot yet find which way they have gone.'

Von Stalhein frowned. 'So,' he said vindictively. 'It would be a good thing if they were soon found — a good thing for yourself — you

understand?'

`Jo, Herr Commandant.'

`That is all.'

The storm-trooper saluted and marched out of the room.

Von Stalhein, after a few moment's reflection, picked up his cap and followed him.

Biggles drew a deep breath and relaxed. He closed the spy-hole and stepped down into the corridor.

`What the deuce is going on?' asked Ginger.

`We'd better not talk here; let's go farther along and I'll tell you all about it,' replied Biggles.

CHAPTER XI

Desperate Measures

As they moved carefully along the corridor, holding their arms in front of their faces to shield them from countless cobwebs,

they saw other mounting stones with more spy-holes like that in the panelling of von Stalhein's room. They looked through each one, hoping they might discover the room in which Algy or the Beklinders were confined; but this, as Biggles pointed out, was too much to expect. In each case the room into which they peeped was in absolute darkness, and as there was no sound they assumed they were now in a part of the castle which was not used.

`My goodness! They didn't trust each other much in the old days,' whispered Ginger. '

Fancy building a place with all these spy-holes!'

`They're not uncommon,' Biggles told him. 'No doubt they were needed in the days when these places were built. There was usually a conspiracy of some sort going on, and a fellow was lucky indeed who could trust even his friends. Few did, with the result that they took precautions to hear what was being said behind their backs. In addition to the spy-hole, there are probably secret doors in this panelling if we knew where to look for them. Never mind about that now. Where the dickens are we getting?'

'Where are you hoping to get?'

I've no idea,' admitted Biggles. 'Our job is to get Beklinder out of this place and out of the country; and, of course, Algy — if we can. The arrival of Beklinder's son on the scene hasn't made our job any easier. I don't suppose for a moment that the Professor will go without his son, or the son without his father. Unless they are together somewhere that is bound to complicate matters. Algy is in no position to help us; he's in a bad way himself. The unfortunate thing is that he doesn't know the facts. He thinks we are prisoners, so his chief concern will be to get into touch with us. Meanwhile, our own position isn't too bright. We've got to find a way out. I'm pretty certain that this passage connects with at least one room in the castle, but whether we can find it is another matter. We can't do anything until we find out where this passage ends. If it comes out inside the castle we might be able to do something. If it emerges outside the wall — well, I'm afraid we should never get in through the gate.'

They went on, walking slowly, examining the walls as they went, but they were blank on either side. The spy-holes no longer occurred, the reason being, as Biggles pointed out, that the panelling had given way to stonework so that the walls on either side were of heavy blocks of roughly hewn masonry. Then, suddenly, a door, pointed at the top in the manner of a Moorish arch, and studded with huge iron nails, barred their way. There was a handle, however, in the form of an enormous iron ring, rusty with age.

Biggles handed the torch to Ginger, and, taking the ring in both hands, attempted to turn it. At first it defied his efforts, but by wrapping his handkerchief around it he managed to raise the latch. He put his shoulder to the door and pushed. With a fearful groaning of rusty hinges it yielded. He pushed it open wide enough to permit their passage, and again taking the torch from Ginger, went through. 'Heavens above!' he whispered, as Ginger joined him. 'What have we here?'

Ginger saw they were in a large vaulted chamber. 'It looks pretty grim to me,' he murmured.

Very slowly Biggles turned the beam of the torch on to the walls, the ceiling, and the floor, and on to certain strange-looking furniture which stood about. At intervals in the walls there were deep recesses, littered with mildewed straw. In several places there were chains fastened by enormous staples to the walls. From the roof hung pulleys, the ropes, rotten with age, drooping to the floor.

'This looks like a forge,' said Ginger in a puzzled voice, laying his hand on a metal stand on top of which was a heap of cinders. He picked up a curious doubled-ended poker. '

What on earth is this thing?' he asked.

Biggles was examining another piece of furniture. 'I don't think there is much doubt about where we are,' he said, in a strained voice. 'This thing gives it away.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is — or was — the torture chamber.'

'Great heavens!' Ginger stared, aghast.

'This is the rack,' went on Biggles. 'You've heard of poor brutes being broken on the wheel — well, there's the wheel over there. Those pretty little cages round the walls were presumably where they kept the prisoners, so that they could see what was in store for them, or what other poor devils were getting. That poker affair you picked up was either a brand, or the tool they used to put people's eyes out. Look, there's the block and the axe.'

I'm afraid this devil's den once resounded with the shrieks and groans —'

'Shut up,' gasped Ginger. 'Let's get out of here. Even von Stalhein's worst jail would be a nursery compared with this chamber of horrors.'

An antiquarian would find it very interesting,' murmured Biggles dryly.

'He might. I don't,' snorted Ginger. 'There's another door over there. Let's go on. If the boss of this place made a habit of coming down to watch his prisoners being tormented, it should lead to his private sitting-room.'

‘I think there's a good chance of it,' agreed Biggles, picking his way through the dreadful furniture to a doorway on the far side of the chamber, similar to the one through which they had entered. 'Hello, it's a spiral staircase,' he observed. 'Watch your step.' Keeping the beam on the floor in front of him he began to mount, with Ginger following close behind. He had thought that the staircase would be only a short one, leading from one floor to another, but when it went on, and on, and on, winding ever upwards, he voiced his surprise.

'If we go on at this rate much longer we shall soon be on the roof,' declared Ginger, stopping to look through a narrow slit in the wall at a star which had suddenly caught his eye. Not until then did he realize how high they had ascended. 'My word! We are already above the castle,' he said. 'We must be in the main tower. I'm looking down on the roof.'

Biggles came back a step and looked through the loophole. 'By jingo, you're right,' he said. 'We're in the keep. We might as well go on to the top now that we've come so far, although there ought to be a doorway opening into the castle yard at ground level.'

We must have passed it.' And with that he went on upwards, muttering that the flapping sounds which preceded them were caused by birds vacating their roosting places.

They were both out of breath by the time they reached the top, finally emerging on to a flat, leaded area bounded by a castellated parapet. Overhead the stars gleamed brightly from the blue dome of heaven. On all sides the country rolled away until it merged into the night, with tiny points of light marking the position of dwelling-houses. A cluster of such lights showed where the village nestled at the foot of the hill. Below them lay the castle and the central courtyard, the whole surrounded by the wall. They were, in fact, on the roof of the central tower.

Biggles, testing each step before he moved his weight, advanced cautiously towards the parapet. Ginger took one look down and drew back hastily. 'I should feel happier if I had a parachute,' he declared. 'I'm no bird.'

'Ssh,' cautioned Biggles, who was staring down into the courtyard.

Tor heaven's sake be careful of that parapet,' warned Ginger. 'It looks to me as if you'd only have to cough to send the whole works overboard.'

'I'm watching it,' replied Biggles in a low voice. 'Something seems to be going on below.'

I'm glad we came up here; it has given me a good idea of the layout of the place. It is easy to see from the lights which is the wing that von Stalhein has had made habitable —

as he told us, you remember? Algy and the Beklinders must be somewhere in there, but I am afraid that there are too many people

about at the moment for us to do any scouting

— even if we can find a way out. Wait a minute, something seems to be happening.'

Ginger crept forward like a cat walking on hot bricks and saw that what Biggles had said was true. A door had been opened, allowing a path of light to fall across the wide, stone-flagged courtyard. Three men were in view. Orders were being called. Then, suddenly, one whole side of the castle building was floodlit in a brilliant white glare, as if a searchlight had been turned on. A big limousine crept slowly from an unseen garage and came to rest almost immediately below them, and they saw that the light came from its headlamps. The door of the car opened and a storm-trooper chauffeur got out. Another trooper walked briskly towards him from the lighted doorway, speaking loudly as he came, so that the words floated up clearly to the watchers on the tower.

Ginger heard Biggles choke back an exclamation. 'What did he say?' he asked.

For a moment Biggles seemed nonplussed. Then, 'They're going to take the Beklinders away,' he breathed in a horrified voice. 'If they do, we're sunk. If they once take them away from here we shall never find them. That's von Stalhein. He's lost his nerve. He knows that we are still hanging around and he is afraid of us. We've got to stop them. If von Stalhein once gets them through that gateway we shall never see them again.'

Ginger said nothing. There seemed to be nothing to say. 'We've got to stop them,'

muttered Biggles again, in a low, tense voice.

'There's no way—' began Ginger.

Biggles cut him short. 'There is always a way,' he snapped. 'I have told you before that there's always a way – if only you can think of it. I've got it. Stand back. Get back to the staircase.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Bust the car. Hold your ears because there's going to be a big noise. This should send the balloon up.' And with that, to Ginger's unspeakable horror, Biggles began pushing at the parapet. It looked flimsy enough, but apparently in places the mortar still held.

Biggles put his foot against the mass and thrust at it.

`You'll go over,' Ginger nearly screamed. 'Give me your hand and lean back.'

Ginger reached forward and gripped Biggles's fingers with his own. He heard Biggles grunt as he pushed again. The mass swayed. Then it disappeared from sight. He was nearly right when he said that Biggles would go over. They both nearly went. But Ginger hung on like grim death to the edge of the opening behind him, and they both fell panting on the lead roof.

Biggles started to speak, but his voice was drowned in the crash of the falling stonework.

Coming as it did in the silence it sounded to Ginger as if the whole castle had collapsed.

He flinched under the shock. 'This is madness,' he thought wildly.

From below there came the banging of doors, shouts, and other sounds of alarm.

‘I fancy that's queered their pitch,' whispered Biggles. quivering with suppressed laughter.

`You nearly queered ours, too,' panted Ginger. 'Did you get the car?'

`Couldn't miss it. It was right underneath.'

`What about the chauffeur?'

‘I think he'd gone to meet the chap who was shouting to him. If he didn't — well, it was just too bad.'

Did any one see you?'

`No. At least, I don't think so. I don't see how they could. I was flat on the roof before they could look up.'

`Great Scott!'

`What's the matter?'

`The other car.'

`What other car?'

'Beklinder's – Beklinder's own car. They could use that.'

Biggles was silent for a moment. 'I'd forgotten all about that,' he admitted bitterly. 'It's a four-seater. They could only – I wonder. Just a minute, stay where you are.' Lying flat Biggles wormed his way to the now sheer drop, and looked down.

Ginger could hardly bear to watch. 'Well?' he asked as Biggles crept back.

'I'm afraid you're right,' Biggles told him. 'Von Stalhein is there, cursing like a madman. The car is as flat as a sardine tin, but I just heard him shout to somebody to get the other car out.' 'Then that's stumped us.'

'Not yet it hasn't,' declared Biggles grimly.

'What—?'

'Don't talk. Let's get down the stairs. I'll go first. Be as quiet as you can because somebody may be looking up to see where our snowball came from. For that reason we daren't use the torch, so for goodness' sake watch where you're putting your feet.' With that Biggles set off down the winding staircase.

Ginger thought the steps would never end. It had seemed a long way up, but, probably on account of the darkness, which made the descent difficult if not dangerous, the way down seemed interminable. He made the best speed he could, but even so Biggles widened the distance between them. They collided at the bottom.

'Just a minute,' said Biggles. 'What's this? Shading it with his hands he switched on the torch for a moment; the brief flash

was sufficient to reveal a number of large square stones placed loosely one on top of the other so that they blocked up what had once been a doorway. It was the roughness of the inside of these stones that had attracted his attention. It was not an easy matter to move the first one, but, by using the screwdriver as a lever he managed it, and peered through the gap thus created. It was, of course, dark, but there was sufficient reflected light from the other end of the courtyard for him to see that they were at the opposite end of it, near the outside wall, which information he passed back to Ginger, before lifting out five more stones which made an opening large enough for them to emerge. 'You'll have to pass the stones out to me,' he told Ginger, as he climbed through; 'we daren't leave the hole open or they will find it, and so discover our corridor.'

From the far side he took the stones which Ginger passed out to him, after which Ginger himself came through and they quickly pushed the stones back into place.

They were now in the courtyard. The far end of it was still brilliantly lighted, but this did not affect them for they were at the other extremity, and still in the black shadow of the tower, which they had just descended. A quick survey of the position revealed that they were about fifteen paces from the encircling wall of the castle, although, from the inside, this was little more than a parapet some three feet high, due to the fact that the courtyard had been built up to a much higher level than the terrain outside — doubtless to allow a defending garrison plenty of room to move about, and at the same time look down on the attacking force, which would find itself faced by a wall needing scaling ladders to surmount.

Biggles peeped round the tower towards the lighted end of the courtyard, and what he saw spurred him to a fresh effort of speed. 'Quick,' he said. 'They'

re getting the car out.' And with that he made a dash for the parapet. Ginger followed close behind him.

Looking down, he saw that it was a drop of some twenty feet to the track that skirted the bottom of the rampart, and he hung back in dismay until he saw Biggles take the rope from his pocket, for such a drop might easily mean a broken leg or a bad sprain. While Biggles was looping the rope round one of the battlements Ginger threw a glance over his shoulder, and saw that although the place where they crouched was in darkness, the far end of the courtyard was still illuminated by several lights, including the headlamps of another car, which he thought was the Professor's Morris. Several people were standing near it. He thought he saw the Beklinders among them, but he was not sure, and had no time to confirm it, for Biggles had already started down the rope and was telling him urgently to follow. This he lost no time in doing. As soon as he was on the path Biggles jerked the rope clear, and, looping it into a rough coil, stuffed it into his pocket again. Simultaneously there came the noise of the car being started up.

Whipping out his automatic, Biggles set off down the path at a run towards the road that led from the village to the main gate of the castle, but before reaching it he turned aside into the trees. 'Keep going!' he panted. 'It's our only chance and it's going to be a close thing.'

For the best part of a hundred yards, until he was certain that he was out of view of the gate, he kept inside the forest; then he struck diagonally towards the road, and on reaching it, after a quick look in both directions, continued down it for a further two hundred yards, where he stopped with a panted, 'Good! We've done it!' At the same time he broke off a piece of dead wood from the lower part of the nearest tree.

Ginger could not imagine what he was about to do. With wondering eyes he watched Biggles place the twig in the middle of the road. Then, switching on the torch, he adjusted it until it showed a red light, and placed it against the twig in such a way that the red light pointed up the road towards the castle gates — which, of course, could not be seen from where they were. The torch was one of the triple-light type, for it had been primarily intended for signalling purposes in accordance with their prearranged plan of sending messages to Algy in the machine.

Biggles returned to Ginger, who had watched all this from the edge of the road. 'I'm going to hold the car up,' he said. 'It's a ghastly risk, but there's no other way. We can't let the Beklinders go. Von Stalhein may be in the car or he may not. In any case, if the two Beklinders are there it is unlikely that there will be more than two guards. I reckon there will only be von Stalhein, with a storm-trooper driving, in the front seats, and the Beklinders in the back. We ought to — hello, that was the gate. The car's coming now.

Get your gun out but don't use it unless you have to. Stay here. I'll take the far side. If by any chance the car doesn't stop, do nothing; otherwise act when I do.'

Biggles would have said more, but there was no time, for already the headlights of the car were turning the treetops to silver. He darted across the road and disappeared into the trees.

CHAPTER XII

Forestalled

The car came on, slowly, as was necessary on account of the state of the road. Ginger held his breath. The driver could

not fail to see the red light — but would he stop? Ginger thought he would, for only a foolhardy driver would go on in the face of such a warning signal. And he was right. His heart leapt when the brakes

were applied and the vehicle ran slowly to a standstill five or six yards short of the ruby glow. An instant later the front door on the driving side swung open and a man got out, walking towards the light, so that he came at once into the glare of his own headlamps. He was a storm-trooper.

Ginger, watching, waited until he saw Biggles, pistol at the ready, move swiftly into the road beside the unsuspecting storm-trooper; then, automatic in hand, he himself made a dash for the car. An instant later he was looking into the surprised face of von Stalhein.

‘Keep your hands in front of you and keep ‘em still,’ snapped Ginger.

A split second later two shots rang out so close together that they almost blended as one.

Ginger's nerves vibrated like banjo strings, but he was too wise to take his eyes from von Stalhein. He heard soft footsteps on the road; his lips went dry as he wondered whose they were, but he did not turn his head. Then a voice spoke. It was Biggles.

‘I’m sorry I had to shoot your man, von Stalhein,’ he said. ‘He shouldn’t have gone for his gun when he saw that I had mine already covering him. Step out, please, quickly. Ginger, get round to the other side.’

Ginger dashed round to the other side of the car and opened the door.

‘Quickly, I said,’ repeated Biggles. ‘I should be sorry to have to shoot you, but I hear your fellows coming down the road, so in the circumstances you will pardon the urgency.’

Von Stalhein stepped out on to the road.

‘Keep your hands still,’ ordered Biggles, taking a pace towards him and running his hands over his pockets. He took a small automatic from the German's hip pocket and put it in his own. ‘You would be well advised to do precisely as I tell you,’ he went on. ‘Start walking back towards the castle.’

Von Stalhein hesitated.

‘I can give you just two seconds,’ grated Biggles.

Von Stalhein shrugged his shoulders, turned about, and started walking slowly up the road towards the castle gate, whence came the sound of running footsteps.

Neither of the Beklinders had spoken. 'We're British agents,' was all Biggles said as he slipped into the driving seat.

'In you get, Ginger,' he ordered.

'Have you picked up the torch?'

Ginger crawled swiftly into the seat beside Biggles and slammed the door. Biggles slammed his. The car moved forward,

swerving round the fallen storm-trooper, who was sitting up near the side of the road. He shouted something as they passed but they could not catch the words.

'He seems to be annoyed about something,' murmured Ginger.

'A brave man but a fool,' said Biggles curtly, as he accelerated. 'Apparently he had the absurd idea that he could unfasten his holster, pull out his revolver, aim, and fire, before I, with my gun in my hand, could pull the trigger. I had to shoot him through the arm. He will know better next time.'

'Where are we bound for?' asked Ginger, as they reached the junction of the castle road and the village street, and Biggles put his foot hard down on the accelerator. The car raced forward.

'I've no idea,' replied Biggles. Then raising his voice a little, but without turning, he said,

'Professor Beklinder, I want you to be good enough to do exactly as you are told; we are going to try to get you out of the country. I take it that that meets with your approval?'

'Most certainly,' answered the Professor. 'But I will not go without my son,' he added.

'I appreciate that,' Biggles told him. 'Have you your passport, by any chance?'

'No.'

'Neither of you?'

'No.'

'Then it's no use our trying to get across the frontier in the ordinary

way. With passports there was just a chance that we might have managed it within the next couple of hours; after that I'm afraid every frontier guard will be on the look-out for us. But it's no use trying it without papers. Every telephone in

the country will start buzzing as soon as von Stalhein gets back to the castle.'

'How shall we get out of the country, then?' asked the Professor anxiously. He spoke with just a suggestion of a foreign accent.

'I can think of only one way,' replied Biggles, 'and that is by using the same means as we came in. That is, by aeroplane.' He suddenly applied the brakes, and, pulling the car to a skidding standstill, turned to Ginger. 'We'd better get things clear,' he said. 'First and foremost, we've got to get the Professor and his son out of the country.'

'What about Algy?' asked Ginger quickly.

'That, for the moment, becomes a side-issue. We shall have to come back for him afterwards. He'll understand that. As far as the immediate present is concerned I don't think we dare risk rushing about in this car. Von Stalhein will have its number, and within a couple of hours every policeman and storm-trooper in the country will be on the watch for it. We've got to try to get hold of Algy's machine. It was dark when he landed, and, as it seems unlikely that it would be dismantled or flown away before morning, it should still be where he left it. There will be a guard over it, of course, but we can't help that. We've got to get it, even if it means a fight. I can think of no other way of getting out of the country. And we've got to work fast. If ever they get hold of the Professor again, or ourselves, knowing that we know the truth about the faked accident, it will be good-bye. Hark!'

Far behind them, from the direction of Unterhamstadt, came the vibrant hum of a high-powered car.

'You see?' said Biggles. 'They've got another car on our track. There must have been one in the village. The pursuit is up.' As he spoke he started the Morris forward again, but cruised along

slowly, half leaning through the open window as if he was looking out for something.

Then, as if finding what he sought, he turned the car off the road and allowed it to run quietly between the trees of the forest that hemmed them in on both sides. Not until the car was a good fifty yards from

the road did he apply the brakes and switch off the lights.

As the car stopped he got out, asking the others to do the same. And hardly had they complied when round the corner came a big open car, driven at racing speed. The seats were packed with storm-troopers. It tore on, and disappeared from sight round the next bend in the road.

'You see what we're up against?' said Biggles. 'That car would soon have overtaken us.'

'We shall do better on foot, across country.'

'You mean, you're going to try to reach the landing-ground?' inquired Ginger.

'Unless you can think of a more promising scheme.'

'No, I can't.'

'There is bound to be a guard, in which case there is likely to be some shooting; nevertheless, we shall have the advantage of surprise on our side. I have two spare weapons — von Stalhein's, and the one belonging to the storm-trooper whom I had to shoot, so we are all right for equipment. One of us ought to get through — and it only needs one of us to fly the machine. If you find yourself in the machine with the Professor and his son, take straight off. Don't wait for me. That's an order — you understand?'

'Perfectly'

'Good!' Biggles turned to the Professor. 'Professor Beklinder,' he said gravely, 'as you must have gathered from our conversation, although we have got you out of immediate danger the position is still serious. We had an aeroplane ready to fly you to England, but unfortunately the pilot was captured, and we assume that the machine is under guard. My plan is to attempt to take it by force, but I cannot jeopardize your life without your consent. Do you agree, or would you prefer to try some other way?'

'If there was another way I should prefer to try it,' admitted the Professor frankly. 'Not for myself, you understand, but on account of my son.'

'Have no fears for me,' declared the boy, stoutly. He turned to Biggles. 'Did I hear you say that you had a spare pistol?' Biggles smiled faintly.

'You did.'

'Then please give it to me. You seem to forget that I have scores of my own to wipe out.'

Without a word Biggles passed him the revolver which he had taken from the wounded storm-trooper, and gave the Professor von Stalhein's automatic.

'Be careful with that, Gustav,' said the Professor, nervously, and thus the others learned the boy's name. 'In case the plan miscarries, there is one thing I should like to say,' he went on, turning to Biggles.

'It is how much I appreciate what you, personally, are doing on our behalf, and the British government—'

'Oh, don't think about that now,' broke in Biggles. 'The British government looks after those who serve it, anyway. My only regret in this matter is that we did not make contact with your son earlier; he would have been a useful ally. But we've no time to waste. If we are all agreed, let us push on. Every hour will make our task more difficult.'

Leaving the car as it stood, they set off through the forest in the direction of the landing-ground, which was, Ginger judged, about two miles away.

They said little as they walked, for the night was still, and, well aware of the distance at which the sound of human voices can be heard in such conditions, Biggles requested silence. So they walked on, Biggles taking the lead, his brief remarks being confined to warnings against obstructions, such as low-hanging branches. They were, of course, travelling across country — if a forest can be so described. It was one which they had not previously seen, and the close-growing trees offered perfect cover. But after going about a mile Biggles suddenly called a halt, and the reason was at once apparent to the others.

They had reached the edge of the forest. Strictly speaking, it was not the edge; the trees ended, but began again on the other side of what was, in effect, a wide strip of cultivated land that had swept far into the forest. The distance to the trees on the far side of this clearing was about two hundred yards, but in the whole of that area there was no cover of any sort.

'What do you think about it?' whispered Ginger.

think it is the sort of place that might be watched,' replied Biggles.

'I don't see anybody.'

'You wouldn't be likely to. A man keeping guard would hardly be such a fool as to stand in the middle of the field. He'd keep back in the trees so that he could not be seen.'

'That looks to me like a footpath running down the middle there,' observed Ginger.

'It is,' put in Gustay. 'I once walked to the edge of the wood yonder; I remember the place well,' he added by way of explanation.

'It would take us over a mile out of our way if we had to go all round the edge of the wood,' remarked Biggles. 'We can't spare

the time to do that. We shall have to go straight across, and risk it.'

The words had barely left his lips, and he had, in fact, taken a pace forward with the object of continuing the march when from out of the forest, at the extreme end of the cultivated land, travelling away from Unterhamstadt, came a fast-moving object, which, as it drew nearer, resolved itself into several component parts.

'Keep quiet,' breathed Biggles, stepping back farther into the trees.

It was soon possible to make out the details of the approaching figures. There was a storm-trooper on a bicycle. Beside him, controlled by leads, ran two Alsatian dogs. The man made no sound, but, pedalling fast, went on down what Ginger had rightly supposed to be a path and finally disappeared into the dim distance. Nobody spoke until he was out of sight.

'That gives us an idea of how careful we shall have to be,' murmured Biggles.

'Where was he off to, I wonder?' said Ginger.

'If that path bears round to the right it would take him somewhere near the open country where Algy landed — that is, if my bump of locality is correct,' answered Biggles.

'Yes, I think the path does go round that way,' put in the Professor, his voice heavy with anxiety. 'What had we better do?'

'We've got to get across this field before we do anything else,' declared

Biggles. 'We can'

t afford to lose a minute. Let's make a dash for it. If we're challenged, go on running, but keep together. Everybody ready? Good. Let's go.'

They broke from the sombre trees and set off at a steady run for the opposite side of the clearing, where, at the foot of a low

hill, the trees began again. They could just see the silhouette of the hill against the sky. At every moment Ginger expected to hear a challenge ring out, but nothing of the sort happened, and he voiced his relief when they once more plunged into the welcome cover of the trees. The Professor was out of breath. 'I am not so young as I was,' he said apologetically, as they waited for him to recover before they went on again.

Groping their way, stumbling over roots, and colliding with unseen obstacles, they pushed on, and they had nearly reached the top of the hill, which began to take the form of a ridge, when a sound split the silence — a sound that pulled them up short. There was no possibility of mistaking it. It was the sound of an aero engine being started up.

'He's done us,' grated Biggles through his teeth, as he ran on to the top of the ridge.

'Who?' asked Gustay.

'Von Stalhein. He's afraid of us. He guessed that we should make for the machine, and he daren't even trust his guard. He's removing our only link with France — look, there it goes.'

By this time they had all reached the top of the ridge, where an outcrop of rock prevented the growth of trees. There was no need for Biggles to amplify his remark, for what had happened was plain for all to see. The ridge overlooked the stretch of open country which they had chosen for a landing-ground. On the side of it nearest to them was a little group of lights. The machine was in the air, heading eastward. The noise of the engine diminished rapidly — became a hum. Some of the lights on the field went out. Figures began to move towards a waiting motor-car. The car went off, and disappeared round the shoulder of a neighbouring hill. Silence fell.



The machine was in the air, heading eastward.

‘Well, that’s that!’ said Biggles in a resigned voice.

The Professor sank down and buried his face in his hands. ‘Here — here, just a minute, Professor,’ chided Biggles.

‘It’s hopeless now.’

‘Hopeless?’ Biggles laughed quietly. ‘If you’d been through what I’ve

been through in my time — and Ginger, too, for that matter — you'd know that nothing is hopeless until you'

re dead — and buried. You were supposed to be dead and buried, don't forget — but here you are.'

'But surely there is nothing we can do, is there?' asked Gustav miserably.

'There are plenty of things we can do,' answered Biggles. 'It's just a matter of choosing the best one.'

'That's right enough,' agreed Ginger, with a bigger show of cheerfulness than he felt in his heart.

Biggles took him aside, and, choosing a sheltered place among the rocks below the ledge, took out his map and the torch. He studied the map for a moment without speaking. Then he placed the index finger of his left hand on a spot a little to the north of the village. '

Look here, Ginger,' he said in a low voice, 'we've got about one chance left — but it wouldn't do to let the others know that things are as bad as that. I'm afraid they are depressed. If they lose heart altogether we shan't be able to do anything with them, so behave as if it were all plain sailing.' Biggles glanced at his wristwatch. 'It's nearly ten o'

clock,' he continued. Now this is what I want you to do. You see this place on the map?'

Ginger dropped on his knees to see more clearly the place Biggles was indicating. 'Yes,'

he said.

'I want you to be there, with the Beklanders, at twenty minutes past twelve precisely.'

'You're not going with us?'

'No. There's no time for answering questions, but I'm going to try to pull off the cheekiest coup of my life. You be on that field at twelve-twenty. Wait until twelve-thirty.

If I am not there by then you can reckon that I shan't be coming. If that happens, forget about me and try to get out of the country as best you can. It's a thousand to one against your doing it, but you can only try;

anyway, there will be nothing else left for you to do.

Make for the French frontier. You know the tricks. Take cover by day and travel only by night. Remember it is better to lie in open fields of crops than in ditches. Your greatest difficulty will be food. Do without it if you can; don't go near houses unless you are absolutely compelled to. People in the country keep dogs, and dogs bark, and by tomorrow the whole country will be looking for us. One bark will be enough to bring a pack of storm-troopers to the spot. But I hope it won't come to that. The place where I hope to meet you is less than four miles from here, which means that if you started now you would be there in an hour — which is rather too soon. Yet with these storm-troopers all over the place it's going to be dangerous for you to hang about in the open.'

'We shall have to pass near the churchyard on the way to this new rendezvous; what's wrong with us hiding in the vault until it's time for us to go on to it?'

'That's a good idea,' declared Biggles. 'You ought to be safe there. I should say it isn't more than a couple of miles from the vault to the rendezvous—'

'What is this rendezvous?' asked Ginger puzzled.

It's a big field. Before we started I looked at it with a view to using it as a landing-ground, but I decided that it was a bit too near the village. Had it become necessary for Algy to land he

might have been heard taking off again. That was why I chose the other place — that and because it was larger. I'm going to try to get hold of an aeroplane. If I can't get a 'plane, I'

ll get a car. I've no time to tell you more than that now. Is everything clear?'

'Absolutely. We'll be at the field at twelve-twenty.'

'That's right. Stay in the vault as long as you can — but don't be late. If I don't turn up —

well, you know what to do.'

'What about Algy?'

'While either of us is alive we'll try to get him out. He knows that. But we've got to get the Beklanders away first. Algy is a personal matter —

they are a national matter.'

Biggles got up and went back to where the Beklinders were waiting. 'I shall have to leave you now,' he said quietly. 'In the meanwhile I want you to do exactly as Ginger orders.'

Your safety will depend upon it.' And with that he walked away through the trees.

Ginger beckoned to the Professor and his son. 'Follow me, please,' he said.

CHAPTER XIII

Ginger Goes Back

As they made their way towards the churchyard Ginger explained the situation as far as he was able to the Beklinders,

who accepted it philosophically and agreed to accompany him to the vault. They avoided roads, and even footpaths, in which matter both the Professor and his son were better informed than Ginger. Indeed, the Professor knew every inch of the country, having —

as he said —stayed in the district many times when he was a young man.

In this way they reached the churchyard without trouble; there were one or two alarms, such as when a whistle was blown on a road near to which they happened to be passing; that was all. On reaching the churchyard Ginger recovered the crow-bar from where Biggles had hidden it, and, prising up the stone slab, they descended into their hiding-place. The time then, by Ginger's watch, was ten-thirty.

'I'm afraid we have rather more than an hour to spend here,' he told the others.

'What does your friend hope to do?' asked the Professor.

'Beyond the fact that he is going to try to get an aeroplane or a car, I do not know,'

answered Ginger, who then went on to describe the rendezvous.

'I am afraid he will have a job to get an aeroplane in Lucrania,' said the Professor, shaking his head.

Ginger switched off the torch. 'Getting into Unterhamstadt was a job — but we got here,'

he observed. 'Getting hold of you was a job — but we got you. In fact, nearly everything we do seems to be a job — but somehow we manage to do it. So while getting hold of an aeroplane may be a job, it doesn't mean that Biggles won't get one.'

'I know the field well,' remarked the Professor.

'Good! That ought to make things a bit easier, at any rate.'

'I could go straight to it,' declared the Professor. 'I have walked over the whole district many times.'

'While we are waiting you might tell me why you came back to this part of the world,'

invited Ginger. 'Wasn't it rather unwise?'

'Yes, I suppose it was even worse than that; it was the height of folly,' admitted the Professor. 'But you see, I had a good reason for coming. It began like this. Some time ago I received an anonymous letter from Lucrania, from a man who signed himself "A Friend", informing me that my wife was dead, but my son, who was born after I had left the country, was living at an address in Prenzel. Needless to say I was astonished and delighted at the letter, although I should have been more sceptical of its authenticity had it not been for the fact that the notepaper bore a secret mark — the mark of the society to which I once foolishly belonged. It was when the activities of this society were exposed, twenty years ago, that I had to leave the country. You must understand that I did not even know of the existence of my son. I did not reply to the letter. That would have been too dangerous. Instead, I hired an agent to spy out the land for me, but either the man was a rogue or else he was in the employ of my enemies; I do not know which; I only know that he betrayed me. He came to me, and after telling me that my son was indeed alive, asked me if I would like to meet him, and on my assurance that I would, he invited me to suggest a meeting-place. At the same time he pointed out that it would be easier for me, carrying a British passport, to come to Lucrania, than it would be for Gustav to get out of that country, for everybody leaving is suspect. As I have already told you, I often came to Unterhamstadt when I was a young man; at that time I was interested in archaeology, and stayed at the hotel, which was handy for the castle which I wished to explore. I was actually writing a paper on my discoveries

when I had to fly from the country.

'Yes, I know that,' put in Gustav.

'How?' asked his father quickly.

'Because after mother died I found the papers, and read them,' answered Gustav simply.

Of course. It was silly of me not to think of that,' resumed his father. 'Well, to conclude, it was not unnatural that I should arrange to meet my son at the place which held for me so many pleasant memories. You see, I spent my honeymoon here. But alas, the whole thing was a fraud to trick me into coming to the country. Even as I approached the village I was apprehended. They took me to the hotel where I was kept in a semi-conscious condition by means of drug injections.'

I wonder what their object was in taking you to the hotel at all,' mused Ginger. 'And, for that matter, why they buried you in a vault instead of a grave.'

I think that is something we shall have to assume, for von Stalhein is never likely to explain his actions to us,' returned the Professor. 'I imagine that von Stalhein knew about the tunnels

— possibly they were discovered when the castle was being renovated. It might not have suited him had I merely disappeared, for that would have led to inquiries. He preferred to pretend that I had been killed in an accident. By using room seventeen at the hotel he was in a position to move me — or anyone else — without being observed, even by the village people. I was carried through the tunnel to the castle. I can only suppose that by placing my coffin in the vault he was in a position to recover it immediately should he ever find it necessary. One way or another the tunnels suited his purposes very well. Had you been captured at the hotel no doubt you would have been taken to the castle that way, for had you been seen in custody by someone in the village the matter might have been reported to England.'

Ginger nodded. 'Yes,' he said thoughtfully. 'They must have taken Algy to the castle via the tunnel. I fancy we were there when he was brought along.'

The Professor continued. 'Once in the castle I was ordered under pain of death to go on with the work I had been undertaking for the British

government. I refused to do this, for in my disappointment at not finding my son I cared little whether I lived or died.

Many interviews I had with that man von Stalhein, who made vague promises about my son, none of which materialized.'

'Then presumably Gustav knew nothing about this?' suggested Ginger.

'No.'

'Then what brought him here?'

Gustav answered for himself. 'By the merest accident I saw in the public library at Prenzel, in an English newspaper, a report of the accident. You see,' he explained, '

knowing from my mother

that my father was in England, and hoping one day to join him, I made myself proficient in the English language so that I might one day get work in England. It was to find the appointments vacant columns that I was reading the paper, and so came upon the account of the accident to my father.'

Ah, now I begin to understand,' murmured Ginger.

'I did not believe the story,' continued Gustav. 'I don't know why, yet somehow I felt that my father was still alive. I suspected that there may have been a plot to get him back into Lucrania — for our police never forget or forgive. The fact that the accident was supposed to have happened at Unterhamstadt was significant. I recalled what I had read about the castle and the secret tunnels in my father's papers, and I thought that, armed with this information, I might perhaps find him. So I determined to come to Unterhamstadt. But all the time, although I did not know it, I must have been watched by the Grospu, the secret police. I was arrested, certified insane, and placed in a mental home. But I escaped, and, disguising myself as a girl, came here.'

'That was a plucky thing to do,' declared Ginger.

'Not pluck, but love of my father whom I had never seen.' 'How long were you here before we came?'

'Two days.'

'What were you doing in the Jew's house — where we first saw you?'

I thought I would risk asking him some questions — the very questions that I heard you ask him.'

Ah — so you were listening?'

'Yes, although it was an accident that I arrived just after you. I dared not, of course, go near the house in daytime, for fear of being seen and bringing suspicion upon myself. So I waited until

it was dark, and everything quiet. I was standing in a shadow watching the house, making sure that no one was in sight, when I saw you enter. Thinking that you might be agents of the secret police I crept across to listen to what you were saying.'

'That explains the whole story,' said Ginger. 'You were the ghost in the churchyard, weren't you?'

'Yes.'

'You nearly frightened me to death.'

'You were not more frightened than I.'

'What were you thinking of doing?'

'Getting into the castle.'

'The castle?'

'Yes. You see, my father in his explorations had found the tunnels and made a plan of them. One went from room number seventeen at the hotel. I looked for that one first, but for a long time I could not find the entrance, and it was dangerous work looking for it; for, as I think you know, the room was always locked. So I thought I would try the entrance in the monastery — it would be safer.'

'The monastery? But what has the monastery to do with the churchyard?'

'This is the monastery — or it was.'

Ginger gasped. 'What fools we were! We never suspected it.' 'Why should you? The monastery has been gone hundreds of years. The church was built from the ruins.'

'That will certainly interest Biggles,' declared Ginger. 'That's my chief's nickname, by the way. Good heavens!' he cried in a startled voice, as a

new thought struck him. 'Do you mean to say there is a tunnel from here to the castle?'

'Yes, there is.'

'Where does it start?'

Ìn here — in this vault. One of the stones is a sham. It hides the entrance. But why do you ask?'

'Because a friend of mine is still a prisoner in the castle. We had to forsake him in order to try to get you away.' Ginger switched on the torch and looked at his watch. 'It is only a quarter to eleven,' he said quickly. 'I've still got over an hour —there is just a chance that I might find him — are you sure about this tunnel?'

'Most certainly,' replied the Professor. 'It joins the one from the hotel to the castle, somewhere about half-way.'

'When we went up the tunnel from the hotel to the castle we did not see an opening.'

'Nevertheless, it is there. I have been through it.'

Ginger rose to his feet. 'Do you mind if I leave you for a little while?' he said.

'Why should you stay with us?' answered the Professor. 'In any case, we know perfectly well where we are to meet your friend. I know the place even better than you do.'

Ginger made up his mind. 'Then I am going to the castle,' he declared, rather breathlessly. 'If I don't come back you know what to do. Whatever happens you must be at the field at precisely twenty minutes past twelve, and watch for Biggles to come. He may come in an aeroplane, in a car, or on foot — I don't know. But you must be there when he arrives.'

'We will do that.'

Ì hope to get back before you leave, but in case I don't, will you give him a message from me? Tell him about the passage and say that I have gone to try to find Algy — he'll understand.'

'Very well. We shall obey your instructions to the letter.'

Ginger picked up the crow-bar. 'Show me the entrance to this tunnel,'

he said grimly.

The Professor walked straight to a marble panel set low down in the wall. Its inscription, if ever there had been one, had been defaced by the ravages of time, but the remnants of some carved scrollwork remained. The Professor inserted his fingers under the carving and tugged. The panel swung open, disclosing a hole large enough to admit a man on hands and knees.

‘How on earth did you discover that?’ Ginger could not help asking.

‘I did not discover it from this end, you may be sure,’ returned the Professor. ‘I came the other way.’

‘From the other tunnel?’

s

‘How far is it from here to the other tunnel?’

‘I do not remember exactly; perhaps a quarter of a mile, more or less.’

‘Thank you.’ Ginger crawled through the entrance. ‘I shall try to get back,’ he said again, ‘

but if I am not here by ten minutes to twelve you go on to the field.’

‘We shall keep the appointment on time.’

‘Good — au revoir.’ Turning, Ginger went on down the tunnel, picking his way by the light of the now rather feeble ray of the torch, for the battery was beginning to show signs of exhaustion.

The tunnel was smaller than the one which connected the hotel with the castle, from which he judged that it was only a secondary line of communication. Even in the perilous circumstances in which he found himself he could not help wondering to what sinister purposes the tunnel had been put in days

gone by. Thus he pondered as he hurried along, only to have his reflections suddenly cut short when he found himself face to face with a brick wall. He searched the walls of the tunnel on either side, but soon had to admit to himself the fact that he could not continue.

The tunnel had been blocked up. Closer inspection of the brickwork which blocked the tunnel revealed it to be of more recent nature than

the rest, and he guessed what had happened. The tunnel had been deliberately closed not very long before. He struck at the brickwork with the crowbar. It gave back a hollow sound, from which he judged that it was not very thick. He struck again, harder, and had the satisfaction of seeing a brick move. After that it was only a matter of time; he propped the torch on the ground in such a way that it threw its light on his work, and then, with both hands free, he set about the wall in earnest. The brickwork crumbled before his furious onslaught, and after ascertaining with the bar that all was clear beyond, he soon had a hole large enough to get through. Picking up the torch, and still carrying the bar, he climbed through the hole and found himself in the tunnel which led from the hotel to the castle. He saw at once that they might have used the tunnel a hundred times without suspecting that the other passage was there, for after it had been blocked up the mildew and fungus had secured a hold so that there was little difference between it and the older brickwork. Hurrying on, he went towards the castle.

He was by no means clear in his mind as to what he was going to do when he got there. It would, he told himself, depend upon what he found; but nevertheless he determined to take any steps, however desperate, to secure Algy's release, for he realized only too well that such an opportunity as the one of which he was now trying to take advantage, would be unlikely ever to occur again. Von Stalhein would see to that.

He reached the end of the tunnel only to find — as he expected — that the door was locked. He wasted no time, but forthwith climbed up over the fallen masonry until he found himself in the narrow corridor in which occurred the spy-hole looking into von Stalhein's office. He went straight to it, intending not to do anything more than look in, for at the back of his mind he had a vague idea of effecting an entrance to the castle by breaking down the panelling of one of the rooms farther on — rooms which he thought, and hoped, were unused.

Von Stalhein's voice reached him even before he opened the spy-hole. A moment later he saw at a glance that the German was in a cold rage, lashing with his tongue about a dozen storm-troopers who stood stiffly to attention in front of him. Ginger could not, of course, understand a word of what was being said, but from mention of Biggles's name he thought that von Stalhein was rating his men for not having found the two Englanders.

Von Stalhein concluded his invective with a sharp word of command.

The men turned, and in single file marched stiffly from the room. Whereupon von Stalhein went quickly to the telephone, had a brief conversation — which again Ginger could not follow —

slammed down the receiver, and, picking up his cap, followed the storm-troopers out of the room, leaving the light on.

Ginger did not know what to do, but remembering Biggles's remark about the likelihood of a sliding panel, he switched off his torch and endeavoured to locate it by seeking for a crack through which the light inside the room would show. He did not find exactly what he sought, but he found a minute glimmer of light, and he pressed against this with the sharp end of the

crow-bar. To his horror the bar went straight through the panelling into the room, the worm-eaten wood crumbling before the iron. Nevertheless, a tiny line of light suggested that an opening was there, if he could only discover the catch that controlled it. Listening for von Stalhein's returning footsteps he searched diligently for the catch, but he failed to find it. Indeed, he convinced himself that there was not one, for the inside of the panelling was as smooth as a board, and had there been any projection, or a sunken finger grip, he could not have failed to find it.

Hardly pausing to consider what he was doing, in sheer desperation he wedged the sharp end of the crow-bar into the thin line of light and attempted to lever the panel aside by brute force. He succeeded beyond his expectations. There was a loud crack followed by a sharp splintering sound, and before he could take his weight off the bar a large section of the rotten woodwork had broken off and fallen with a crash into the room. The corridor was, naturally, instantly flooded with light from the room.

Ginger stared at the gaping hole, petrified with horror and alarm, for the noise had seemed to him sufficient to bring everyone in the castle to the spot, and if anyone entered the room the hole in the wall would instantly be seen.

His first lucid thought was that he must get the panel back into place before von Stalhein returned, or his corridor would be discovered and his capture assured. With this object in view he scrambled through the hole and jumped down into the room, a distance of a mere two or three feet. Not until he was there did he realize that what he had hoped to achieve was impossible. He could not get back into the tunnel and temporarily fix the panel in place from that side. He could

put the panel roughly into position from where he now stood, as he quickly ascertained; but he

was, of course, on the wrong side of it. And while he stood there, his brain racing, almost overcome by dismay, he heard footsteps approaching.

Prompted now by instinct rather than by deliberate thought, he pushed the panel roughly into place and dived for the only cover the room offered, which was behind the tall door of the safe, which von Stalhein had left open. As he passed in front of it he saw the Professor's bottle of high explosive standing on a shelf, and with a wild idea of blowing the whole place to pieces if the worst came to the worst, he snatched it with his left hand, at the same time taking out his pistol with the other. 'If there is going to be a rough house I am at least well armed,' he thought grimly.

He was rigid behind the safe door when von Stalhein came back into the room. He held his breath, fully expecting the panel to fall down under the vibration of the German's heavy footsteps. But it remained in place, and von Stalhein sat down at his desk, in which position his back was turned to Ginger, who remained where he was, for he had no wish to start trouble against odds which his common sense told him were too heavy. He noted with satisfaction that von Stalhein's nerves seemed to be on edge, for he rapped irritably on the desk in front of him with a lead pencil. He reached for the telephone, changed his mind, and slammed the receiver down again. Ginger's prayer of thankfulness — for he was afraid that the German was again going to summon his men — was cut off short when the man in front of him picked up the instrument and snapped what was clearly an order. But Ginger's heart leapt, for he had caught the word *Englander*, which in the circumstances he took to refer to Algy.

Von Stalhein continued drumming on his desk with his pencil, and thus the situation remained for two or three minutes, which seemed like an eternity to Ginger, who was terrified that von Stalhein might decide at any moment to close the safe, in which case they would meet face to face.

Heavy footsteps outside the door sent him huddling closer against the wall behind him.

The door was flung open. Two storm-troopers entered. Between them was Algy. All three took up a position in front of von Stalhein's desk.

`Lacey, I have decided to send you away,' said von Stalhein harshly.

`Why, what's the matter – lost your nerve?' asked Algy coolly.

Von Stalhein fixed his monocle in his eye and regarded Algy with a hostile glare. 'You would be wise to remember where you are,' he said frigidly.

Algy smiled. 'Von Stalhein, you're a liar,' he said evenly. 'You haven't got my friends or you wouldn't behave like this.'

`Silence!' Von Stalhein brought his fist down with a bang on the desk.

Ginger shuddered, and this time his fears were justified. The panel fell with a crash into the room.

There was dead silence as all eyes switched to it.

Ginger knew that for better or worse the end had come. He left his hiding-place, and with Indian-like tread advanced swiftly to the desk. As he took the last step a board creaked, and all eyes flashed to him.

Ginger's automatic was up. 'Keep still, everybody,' he jerked out. 'Von Stalhein, tell your men to—'

He got no farther. One of the storm-troopers reached for his revolver. Ginger's automatic spat. The man stared at him foolishly for a moment and then sank to the floor.

`The door, Algy — lock the door!' cried Ginger shrilly, knowing that the shot would be heard all over the castle. 'Keep still, von Stalhein, or you'll get yours,' he went on crisply, his face as white as death.

The second storm-trooper started to reach for his revolver holster, but the muzzle of Ginger's weapon swung round on him and he remained motionless, his hand poised in mid-air.

Algy had dashed to the door. He locked it an instant before the handle was turned and a weight thrown against it. There was a sound of hammering and many voices. He hurried back to the motionless group at the desk.

`Get that fellow's gun,' ordered Ginger.

Algy took the storm-trooper's revolver from its holster. `Now von Stalhein's.'

Algy complied.

'That's the second pistol of mine you've taken tonight,' said von Stalhein whimsically.

'I think it's as many as we shall need,' Ginger told him smoothly. 'Come on, Algy, it's time we went.'

'Which way?' asked Algy, as there came a thunder of blows on the door.

'Through the hole where the panel fell out. Get a move on. When you get there, keep these fellows covered until I can join you.'

Algy ran to the corridor and turned about, a weapon in each hand. 'Come on!' he shouted above the clamour outside the door.

Ginger dashed to the hole and ducked into it just as the door crashed inwards. 'This way!'

he shouted, and set off down the corridor.

Now until this moment he had completely forgotten the bottle which he still clutched in his left hand. In the other he held his automatic, leaving no hand free to hold the torch. In the darkness he was fearful of dropping the bottle, so as a last resort he put it into his pocket rather than take the risk. His left hand was now free to hold the torch, and with the fast-expiring beam making only a feeble glow in front of them, they hurried on.

As they reached the fallen brickwork there were shouts behind them. Ignoring them, they squirmed through into the main tunnel, Algy turning on the top to fire three quick shots down the passage behind them. 'That ought to discourage 'em,' he said lightly.

'Buck up!' cried Ginger, in a panic, for he heard the lock turning in the big door, which he realized, of course, that Algy knew nothing about.

Algy ran — or rather skidded on the slippery floor — after Ginger, who was making the best speed he could up the tunnel. And it was not until then, when the door was flung open, that he perceived the danger. The tunnel was filled with a medley of sounds.

'Is it all clear at the hotel?' shouted Algy.

'We're not going to the hotel,' Ginger told him.

`This tunnel goes to the hotel; I know that because they brought me up it not long ago.'

`Keep going, I'll show you another way,' panted Ginger, as a shot zipped along the wall.

He reached the side turning, and with a gasp of relief ducked through it as several more shots whizzed down the tunnel, the reports nearly deafening them. Algy followed.

With Ginger still leading they ran on, their pursuers never far behind them. Fortunately the tunnel was on a slight bend, which

kept them just out of sight of the men who came storming along; what was more important, it prevented any direct shooting. Nevertheless, Ginger was more than a little worried, for a glance at his watch showed him that the time was a quarter to twelve, which left him in doubt as to whether the Beklinders had started for the rendezvous.

They might have started, or, on the other hand, they might only be on the point of leaving; either way, he was leading a red-hot trail to their hiding-place, which was bad, for the escape of the Beklinders was more important than their own. Had it been possible he would have laid a false trail, but there was no alternative route, so he could only go on, well aware that if the Beklinders were still in the vault, the precipitate arrival of pursued and pursuers would be bound to cause a panic and perhaps jeopardize all Biggles's work.

`How much farther?' panted Algy.

`We're nearly there,' answered Ginger, stumbling, and breaking into a cold perspiration as he remembered the bottle, and thought of what might happen if he fell.

`Here's the end,' he gasped, as the opening into the vault came into view.

`Is Biggles here?'

`No.'

`Where—?'

`He's gone on. We've got to meet him. But the Professor may be here.' Ginger realized that as Algy knew nothing about what had happened during the last few hours this was an inadequate explanation, but

there was no time for details.

They reached the entrance to the vault and scrambled through. One glance showed Ginger that the Beklinders had left, for which he was thankful, but as they knew nothing of the

hue and cry, if he failed to overtake them and warn them of it, it was likely that they would be recaptured. A desperate expedient occurred to him and he resolved to take the chance. 'Get outside,' he told Algy frantically. 'There are the steps — get outside and lie down — hurry.'

He dashed back to the entrance to the tunnel 'Help yourselves to that,' he yelled, and hurled the bottle with all his might. The instant it had left his hand he whirled about and made a dash for the churchyard, hoping to reach it before the explosion occurred. He almost succeeded. He managed to get to the top step when a blast of air, almost solid in its force, shot him out like a champagne cork.

Following the blast came a streak of electric blue flame. For a split second it spurted through the vault entrance like a blow-lamp; then the earth shook with an explosion so violent that to Ginger it felt like the end of the world. Half dazed, a smell of scorching in his nostrils, he staggered to his feet, and saw Algy doing the same thing close at hand.

'What was that?' gasped Algy.

'One of the Professor's little squibs,' answered Ginger. 'Let's keep going; we've a long way to go.' He set off at a run across the churchyard in the direction of the rendezvous.

Vaulting over the wall they went on without stopping to look behind, and as they ran Ginger gave Algy a sporadic account of what had happened and the situation as it now existed.

'The Beklinders shouldn't be far — in front of us — then?' puffed Algy.

'We ought to overtake them before they get to the field,' Ginger told him.

'Can't we — slow down — for a bit? I don't think — anyone is — following us.'

Ton Stalhein would hear the explosion, and he would probably guess what caused it,'

answered Ginger, easing the pace to a fast walk. 'He might even see

the flash from the castle, and that would give him our position. His entire pack will be after us by this time.

It's going to be touch and go.'

They both swerved violently as a figure stepped suddenly from behind a clump of bushes which they were at that moment passing.

It's all right; it's only me,' said Gustav. 'We heard somebody coming and hid until we saw who it was.'

The Professor also emerged from his hiding-place. 'What was that explosion?' he asked.

It was that little bottle of syrup which you mixed to blow von Stalhein up with,' Ginger told him. 'He took it away from you and put it in his safe, you remember? A mob of his greyshirts were on our trail so I tossed it back for them to play with. By the way, this is Algy Lacey — he's one of us; but postpone the "How-d'ye-do" stuff until later on. We're all right for time, I think, but the farther we get away from this locality, the better.

Professor, you know the way, so will you please take the lead?'

In single file they resumed their journey. They saw no one, but more than once they heard sounds which told them that a hue and cry was in progress — shouts, whistles, and the honking of motor-car horns.

'They'll have a job to find us,' declared Algy confidently; 'in country like this, with so much timber about, looking for anybody would be worse than trying to find a pin in a cornfield.'

I'd agree with you except for one thing,' muttered Ginger anxiously.

And what's that?'

'They've got dogs.'

'Phew! I didn't know that.'

I should feel easier in my mind if I didn't know. They're not ordinary animals; they're trained for the job; I've seen them at work.'

I don't think we need worry, we are nearly there,' put in the Professor. The field is just beyond the belt of trees in front of

us.'

They trudged on, and had just reached the trees when, from far away in the direction whence they had come, one of the most sinister of all sounds floated to their ears on the still night air. It was the deep-throated bay of a hound.

‘It sounds as if they’ve got the dogs on the job,’ murmured Algy.

‘They’ll have to travel fast to catch us,’ said Ginger confidently, looking at his watch. ‘It’

s twelve-fifteen. We have only five minutes to wait.’

They went on again through the trees.

‘This should be the place,’ announced the Professor, as they forced their way through the undergrowth and emerged into the open country beyond.

‘You’re quite sure about that?’ said Ginger. ‘I’ve left it to you.’ ‘Yes, this is it.’

Ginger looked round the boundaries of the big field in front of him. ‘Yes, it must be,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it’s big enough to get a machine in, and there can’t be many fields of this size about here.’ He whistled quietly and listened for a reply; but there was none. ‘I was hoping that Biggles might be here a bit early,’ he explained. ‘But apparently he isn’t here yet,’ he added, looking again at his watch. ‘Twelve-eighteen,’ he announced. ‘Two minutes to go.’

The sudden shrill of a whistle sent them all facing the way they had come. A dog barked furiously. There was another whistle, followed by a shout.

‘I should say they are within half a mile of us,’ murmured Algy.

‘Well, if they arrive before Biggles there is only one thing we can do,’ declared Ginger, holding up his pistol and stepping backward a few paces so that he could see the top of a slight rise in the ground behind the belt of trees. ‘The result will depend on how many there are of them. We’ll do our best to make things warm for them, however many there are.’

‘It is twenty past twelve,’ announced the Professor. He may have tried not to show it, but his voice was heavy with disappointment.

‘Your watch is probably a minute fast,’ Algy told him cheerfully.

'I'm afraid your friend isn't coming.'

'That's because you don't know him as well as we do,' said Ginger.

'Look – here come the greyshirts over the hill.' He started to count as figures, silhouetted against the sky, began to appear. 'That seems to be the lot,' he said, when he had counted up to ten. 'Ten and two couple of hounds. "Ten little greyshirts standing in a line, a bad boy plugged one and then there were nine," he misquoted glibly.

'This is no time for joking,' said the Professor severely. 'Personally, that's where I think you are wrong, Professor. We—'

'Would it not be better if we ran on?' broke in Gustav.

'I'm not doing any more running,' stated Ginger emphatically. 'Biggles said meet him here, so here I stay. I'm tired, anyway.'

'Yes, I'll bet you are,' said Algy quietly, looking at Ginger, whose eyes were heavy for want of sleep.

The figures could no longer be seen on the ridge. The rustle of bushes on the far side of the trees indicated plainly where they were.

'It looks as if we shall have to fight for it,' said Algy calmly. 'Keep together, everybody, or we shall be plugging each other in the dark.'

There was a soft pattering among the dry leaves under the trees. It stopped abruptly. A dog growled.

CHAPTER XIV

Biggles Goes to Prenzel

hen Biggles had left the others after seeing Algy's machine take off, he knew what he was going to do — or, rather, what he was going to try to do.

Searching his brains for another means of escape, it was only natural that he should dwell first on the chances of getting an aeroplane. There was, he knew, an air force in Lucrania, but, never having been concerned with it, he could not recall where the military aerodromes were located; nor had he any means of finding out. Then, suddenly, he remembered that there was a regular service operated by Planet Airways, running between Prenzel and Croydon, via Hamburg. A passenger machine left each terminus at nine in the morning, and a mail plane at twelve midnight. As soon as this thought occurred to

him his mind was made up. Somehow — he did not know how — he would use the mail plane. There was just a chance that he might recognize the pilot, in which case he would endeavour to enlist his services by telling him frankly what the position was; but whatever happened he would use the mail plane, even if he had to purloin it.

Prenzel was about forty miles away, which meant that he would have to return to the car which they had abandoned in the wood. There was no other way of getting to Prenzel before the machine left.

It was with the project still fluid in his mind that Biggles told Ginger of his intention of leaving the party. The revelation of his plan would, he knew, involve lengthy explanations, possibly a long debate, and as every minute was precious it was for this reason that he departed hurriedly without divulging the details.

Stopping occasionally to listen, he got back without incident to the place where the car had been left. It was still there. The road, or as much as he could see of it, was deserted.

Before getting into the car he kicked off the G.B.' plate with his heel, and picking up a handful of moist earth rubbed it over the number-plate so as almost to obliterate the registration letters. Then he started the car, and backed, not without difficulty, to the road. Putting his pistol on the seat beside him, he sped down the road in the direction of the capital city of Lucrania.

He had not gone many miles before he was provided with proof of how far he had been right when he had said that the police would be on the look-out for the Morris. Going through the village of Garenwald a red lamp was waved in front of him. He could just discern two uniformed figures behind it. He did not stop. On the contrary he slammed the palm of his hand on the electric horn, and at the same time pressed his foot on the accelerator. He smiled grimly as the red light fell into the road and the two figures flung themselves aside. He felt his mudguard graze one. Instinctively he bent low over the steering-wheel; and it was a good thing that he did, for a bullet ripped through the coachwork behind him and bored a neat round hole through the windscreen just over his head.

He did not turn, but went straight down on the main road that led to Prenzel. He was tempted to leave it and take to secondary

roads, and he would have done so had he known the country better; but he dared not run the risk of losing his way. So he raced on,

glancing behind him at frequent intervals to see if there were any signs of pursuit.

Five minutes later, on a long straight piece of road, he saw behind him the blazing headlights of another car, following at a speed which told him that he was the object of it, for the needle of his own speedometer was over the sixty mark.

For the next two or three minutes he had to concentrate on the road, for there were several bends, but when he looked behind again he saw to his annoyance that the following car had lessened the gap between them. It was obvious that it must presently overtake him if he did nothing to prevent it. Ahead were the lights of a small town, and his common sense told him that he could not hope to get through it without trouble, for the police at Garenwald would have telephoned to their colleagues along the road the news that the 'wanted' car was coming in their direction.

A knowledge of continental road signs now stood him in good stead. His headlights flashed on one. It was a small black locomotive against a white background; below, a number of red lines had been drawn round the upright post. The sign warned him that he was approaching a level crossing; four red lines told him that it was two hundred metres ahead. Knowing that the chances were that it would be closed against him, he switched off his lights and swung down a side turning to the left; he groped his way along it until he came to a turning on the right, which once more took him in the direction of the town.

Watching the road he had just left he saw the headlights of the pursuing car flash past the side turning, and knew that

it would be suicidal to go on in the Morris. However, ready to jump out at an instant's notice, he clung to it for the time being, and so reached the town. A few cars were standing against the pavement on either side of the road, and he was about to attempt to exchange his own for one of them when he saw something that suited him even better. A short distance down the street was a cinema, with a car park adjacent. In it were perhaps forty or fifty cars.

He drove straight in, took his car to the place indicated by the attendant who came forward, and then made a pretence of arranging something inside the car until the man had gone. Putting his automatic in his pocket, and satisfied that all was clear, he selected a big car of unknown make, and, after a swift glance around, tried the door handle. It was locked. Three more cars he tried in turn before he

found one which had carelessly been left open by its owner. It was a big car, and again of a make unknown to him, but he did not trouble about that. He got in, started the engine, and made slowly towards the exit.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the car-park attendant running towards him, waving an arm; but he did not stop. He turned into the road and promptly accelerated. Relying on his sense of direction he took the next turning on the right, and, as he had hoped, found himself back once more on the main road, apparently in the centre of the town. A group of storm-troopers and local police were standing there, deep in earnest conversation; they glanced at the approaching car, and then, to Biggles's infinite relief, resumed their conversation. He went on towards Prenzel, driving carefully until he reached the outskirts of the town.

He was just congratulating himself on having got clear when he saw in front of him two policemen in the act of putting a pole

across the road; they had just laid it on the ground, preparatory to placing it on two trestles, one on each pavement. Seeing the car coming they paused in what they were doing. One raised a hand.

'You're just too late,' muttered Biggles, as he screeched his horn and put his foot down on the accelerator. The policemen leapt aside as the car bore down on them, and Biggles settled down into his seat as he saw an open road ahead. A signpost told him that he was now only twenty-two kilometres from Prenzel. He had never been to the airport, but he knew that it was four or five miles out of the city, and on the western side, for easy communication with the capitals of western Europe. He was now travelling north-east, so he reckoned that only about twelve miles separated him from his objective. He covered six of these at racing speed, and then saw another village ahead. Had there been a side turning he would have avoided the village, but there was none, so he could only go on; but he slowed down, staring through the windscreen for the police patrol which he felt certain would be there.

At the entrance to the village street he saw what he was afraid he might find — a barricade. As far as he could make out it comprised, as had the previous one, a round pole placed across the road, each end resting on a trestle. There was a small group of people on either side. His headlights flashed on the metal buttons of police and stormtroopers.

There was no question of stopping. It did not occur to him to do so,

for that, he knew, would be the end of the affair as far as he was concerned, and probably the end of him, too; he was still cruising at about forty miles an hour, but the speed-indicator needle swung upwards as his foot came down on the accelerator — and stayed there. His hooter wailed a warning of his intentions.

Then he gripped the steering-wheel with both hands. His lips parted in a cold, mirthless smile.

At the last moment before the impact he saw the spectators fling themselves aside as they realized what he was going to do. With a splintering crash the radiator hit the pole.

The car swerved violently, mounted the kerb, grazed a shop front — tearing off a headlight — and ricocheted back on to the road. Biggles clung to the wheel. To make matters more difficult for him the second headlamp had been knocked sideways, but did not break off; strangely enough the light remained on, but, blazing at an angle of forty-five degrees from its correct position, gave him a false sense of direction, with the result that he knocked an approaching policeman off his bicycle before he could switch the light off and get back on the crown of the road. Two shots hit the back of the car as he roared on down the street, hooting frantically, for there were several people about, and he had no wish to kill an innocent party. Possibly because of the danger of hitting civilians, no more shots were fired.

Still on the look-out for further obstructions he roared on out of the village. Once more the road lay clear ahead. On he raced, occasionally glimpsing a signpost which gave him the direction of the city. Presently he saw its lights in the distance, and he knew that he must be somewhere near the airport. Another minute and he saw the red glow of a neon beacon on his left front. As near as he could judge it was about two miles away. He also saw something else. Coming towards him down the road, but still some distance away, were the headlights of three cars, close behind each other. Looking over his shoulder he saw more lights behind him, and knew that at last he was caught between two parties of the enemy. The road ran across open, hedgeless

fields, so, after running close to the side to make sure that there was no ditch, he swung the car off the road into a field of growing corn. The wheels sank deep into the soft earth, but he ploughed his way on for about a hundred yards. Then he stopped, jumped out, and ran on towards the beacon.

Glancing back as he ran, he saw the cars on the road meet and stop about a quarter of a mile beyond the place where he had turned off. A group of figures moved vaguely in the headlights. Hoping that it would take them some time to find his abandoned car he ran on, and without trouble reached the boundary lights of the aerodrome, but was still some distance from the airport buildings. Looking at his watch he saw with alarm that it was ten minutes to twelve. He dared not trespass on the aerodrome both on account of getting in the way of machines landing and taking off, and for fear of attracting attention to himself; he had to follow the wire boundary fence, with the result that it was five minutes to twelve before he found himself near the hangars.

Several machines were standing on the tarmac, but only about one were there any signs of activity. It was a twin-engined Lockheed Electra, bearing British registration letters; on its nose were the 'arrow and globe' insignia of Planet Airways. The fact that the engines were ticking over was all the confirmation he needed that it was the machine he hoped to find — the London-bound mail plane. Two men were standing near the wheels, holding the cords attached to the chocks. Another, evidently the mechanic who had started the engines, was walking back towards the brightly illuminated booking hall from which two uniformed figures had just emerged and were strolling slowly towards the machine.

Biggles climbed over the fence and walked towards the machine. He was standing near the cabin door when the two pilots arrived. Seeing him, they broke off their conversation and looked at him curiously.

'Who are you — what do you want?' asked one.

Biggles did not recognize either of them. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I hoped to find somebody whom I knew.' He dropped his voice. 'I need your help,' he went on. 'I'm a British agent. I have vital information to get home, and the frontiers are closed.'

'Sorry, but we can't get mixed up in that sort of business,' declared the first officer curtly.

'Just a minute — have you any proof of what you say?' asked the captain.

'No, I haven't,' Biggles was forced to admit.

'Then I'm sorry, but there is nothing doing,' returned the captain. The continent is rotten with refugees all trying to get into England. We've

been tricked before, and we're not having any more of it. If you get to London they'll only send you back.'

'They won't send me back,' announced Biggles grimly. 'tell you I'm an agent.'

'What do you want — a lift to London?'

'More than that, I'm afraid,' murmured Biggles apologetically, 'I've got to pick up three more people from Unterhamstadt.' 'Where's that?'

'It's a village near the frontier — about forty miles from here.' 'I've never heard of the aerodrome.'

'There isn't one.'

'You're not suggesting that I land my ship in a field, are you?' 'That's what it means.'

'You must be off your head. Look out of the way, we're due off.'

Biggles glanced towards the airport buildings. He did not move a muscle as he saw several police walk out of the booking hall and stand on the tarmac, staring towards the Electra. There was a shout.

Biggles looked at the two pilots. 'I think those people are calling you,' he said calmly.

Both the captain and the first officer turned. 'Yes, I think you're right,' said the captain. '

You'd better stay here until we come back, then I'll have another word with you.'

To Biggles's joy both pilots started walking quickly towards the group of officials now coming towards the Lockheed. He did not hesitate. Ducking under the wing, he came up in front of the machine and without warning hit the nearest mechanic under the jaw. He staggered backwards, dragging the chock with him. The second man bolted as Biggles rushed at him. He dropped the cord he was holding. Biggles snatched it up, tore the chock aside, and made a dash for the cabin. It was nearly his last movement on earth; for the first time in his life, although perhaps it was excusable in the circumstances, he forgot the whirling steel propellers. As he ducked under the wing he felt a blast of air on his face, and knew that a propeller blade had missed him by inches. The shock turned his lips dry, but he did not stop.

Before he had reached the cabin door a crowd of men, the two pilots among them, were racing towards the machine. The leader was not more than twenty yards away.

Biggles did not bother about closing the door. He made a dash for the cockpit. And not until then did he see that there was somebody already in the machine. A man in a neat blue uniform, with earphones clamped over his head, jumped up from the instrument at which he had been sitting. It was the wireless operator.



Without warning he hit the nearest mechanic under the jaw.

Biggles did not speak. He pushed his hand into the man's face and flung him backwards into his seat. Then, dropping into the pilot's seat, he pushed the master throttle open. As the machine began to move forward the wireless operator came up and grabbed him from behind.

'Look out, you fool, you'll kill us both!' yelled Biggles.

Which was true enough, for the machine was gathering speed every

instant. The wireless operator evidently realized this, for he released his hold. His face was pale with fright. '

'What do you think you're doing?' he shouted.

'Taking off — it's time you knew that,' snarled Biggles. 'Sit down before you get hurt.'

'But—'

'Shut up! Sit down, I tell you.'

'Who are you?'

'You can ask the police that when we get home,' said Biggles curtly, as the machine became airborne. 'I'm a British agent, and I've got to get out of the country — quick.'

'Can you fly this kite?'

'If I can't, it's going to be just too bad for you,' snapped Biggles, bringing the machine round on a course for Unterhamstadt.

The wireless operator, after a helpless shake of his head, sat down at his instrument and picked up the fallen earphones.

'You'll soon be picking up some interesting scraps of news on that thing,' smiled Biggles, as he settled down into his seat.

CHAPTER XV

Reunion

Ginger might not have admitted it, but when two minutes had gone by after the appointed time his heart began to

sink. Biggles had not come; and with each succeeding second his advent seemed even more unlikely. That in itself was bad enough, but the fact that the storm-troopers would certainly arrive at the place where they were waiting within the next five minutes made the whole position seem hopeless. Still, he did not say so. He could still hear the dog in the bushes; from time to time it uttered a low growl, but it did not show itself possibly because it was too well trained.

'I think we'd better surrender ourselves without causing further trouble,' suggested the Professor, in a resigned voice. 'Otherwise it will only be all the worse for us.'

'Don't you believe it,' growled Algy. 'We'll give these thugs something to remember us by, anyway.'

As he said the words there came a sound in the still night air that caused Ginger's heart to leap. 'He's coming!' he said, in a tense voice. It was only with difficulty that he restrained himself from shouting the words. 'Listen!' he went on. 'It's a plane. Can't you hear it?'

'Your faith in your leader is praiseworthy, but even if it is an aeroplane, is there any reason to suppose that he is flying it?' remarked the Professor despondently. 'It might be just a passing machine.'

'It might be, but it isn't,' declared Ginger confidently. 'There you are, what did I tell you?'

he went on quickly. 'It's coming this way.'

'That sounds like a twin-engined job to me,' murmured Algy dubiously.

'I don't care if it's an Empire flying-boat, I'll bet Biggles is at the stick,' asserted Ginger firmly.

There was a sudden crashing in the bushes behind them, for they were now standing out in the field, staring up at the sky whence came the roar of the approaching aircraft. The commotion in the bushes increased; a shot was fired. It was followed by a rapid conversation.

'They are calling attention to the behaviour of the dogs,' translated the Professor. 'They are now coming on again.'

Algy took charge of the situation. 'Lie down, everybody,' he ordered. Then, as they obeyed, he addressed the Professor. 'I can't speak German,' he said, 'so will you shout to them and tell them that the first man who shows himself will be shot? Tell them that we are armed, and that we will fight.'

The Professor shouted something in German.

It was as well that they were lying down, for a volley of shots rang out, the bullets zipping viciously through the undergrowth.

Algy fired back at the flashes. 'Watch for the machine, Ginger,' he shouted, for there was no longer any point in remaining silent.

The machine's landing,' called Ginger.

`Take the others with you and run for it as soon as his wheels are on the ground,' roared Algy, without looking round.

`What about you?' returned Ginger.

`Never mind me – I'll be along. Give me the Professor's gun –he won't need it.'

Ginger handed Algy the weapon, so that he now had a gun in each hand. Curiously enough, they had both belonged to von Stalhein. One had been taken from him in the car, and the other Algy himself had taken from the German when Ginger had rescued him.

Seeing that the others had gone he started a rapid fire into the trees, in the direction of the approaching storm-troopers, moving his position after every shot. Ginger's voice reached him He was shouting that the machine was now on the ground.

`Get aboard!' shouted Algy.

Ginger emptied his revolver into the bushes. Then, shouting to the Beklinders to follow him, he ran like a deer towards the big machine which was now taxiing towards them.

The noise of its engine drowned all other sounds. An unknown man in a blue uniform was standing at the cabin door when he reached it.

`Get in!' shouted the stranger, who seemed to be beside himself with excitement. 'Your boss is at the stick. I shall get fired for this when I get back—'

`You'll be lucky to get back,' Ginger told him, as he bundled the Professor and his son into the cabin. Looking round for Algy he saw him running a zigzag course towards the machine. A number of men had appeared at the edge of the wood. Spurts of orange flame showed that they were shooting.

Panting, Algy reached the machine. Ginger helped him in.

They fell in a heap on the floor. 'All clear,' shouted Ginger from where he lay.

By the time he was on his feet the machine had swung round and was bumping over the uneven ground for the take-off. The wireless

operator was staring foolishly at his hand, from which blood was dripping.

‘Something hit my hand,’ he gasped.

‘You’re lucky it didn’t hit your head,’ grunted Ginger as he hurried forward to the cockpit where Biggles was sitting. He grabbed a seat to steady himself as the machine swerved slightly; then the bumping ceased and he knew that they were in the air.

‘I’ve got Algy,’ he yelled triumphantly in Biggles’s ear. ‘You’ve what?’

‘I’ve got Algy.’

At first Biggles looked incredulous; then a smile broke over his face. ‘Masterly work,’ he said. ‘Make yourselves comfortable while I take you home.’

Looking down the lighted cabin Ginger saw that the others were already sitting or reclining in the seats in various stages of exhaustion following the last few hectic minutes. He dropped into the seat next to Biggles. ‘By gosh, we’ve done it, after all,’ he cried jubilantly.

Biggles did not take his eyes off the windscreen. ‘I believe you’re right,’ he said. ‘But it doesn’t do to pat yourself on the back too soon — not in flying, at any rate. Look ahead.’

Ginger had been so taken up with what was going on inside the cabin that he had paid no attention to anything else. Realizing that there was a definite reason for Biggles’s remark he peered ahead through the windscreen, and stared at what he saw. The sky was divided into many clean-cut sections by the white beams of searchlights. He gazed at them for a moment or two without speaking, noticing that the lights were set in a long, straggling line. ‘That’s the frontier, I suppose?’ he said thoughtfully.

‘That’s it,’ returned Biggles briefly.

‘They’ll have guns there.’

‘You bet your life they will.’

‘Well, we’ve got to get through ‘em.’

‘Right again,’ said Biggles. ‘We should find this sort of thing whichever way we tried to get out of the country’

Ginger glanced at the altimeter and saw that they were at four thousand feet. 'We're a bit low, aren't we?'

'I daren't risk climbing any higher,' said Biggles, glancing through the side window on his right.

'Why not?'

'It would take time. I'm going to charge straight across — or try to.'

'But couldn't we turn back? With a light load like this you could take the machine up to twenty thousand, cut the motors, and then perhaps glide across without being spotted.'

'Take a look over to the right,' murmured Biggles, without taking his eyes from the windscreen.

Ginger looked, and saw a number of twin pairs of lights at about their own altitude. His heart missed a beat. 'They're machines,' he said.

'Fighters, by the rate they're travelling.'

'They're after us.'

'I don't suppose they're just roaring around for the fun of it.' 'Shouldn't we do better to put our lights out?'

'Yes — I was only waiting until Algy had tied Sparks's hand up. I think he got a shot through it. He's just finished, I think.' Biggles turned a switch and plunged the machine into darkness — except, of course, the instrument board.

'One of them is getting close; he's trying to work round behind us,' observed Ginger, who was still staring through the window at the enemy machines.

'I'm watching him.'

'I wish we had a gun,' said Ginger wistfully.

'The trouble about wishing is, it doesn't get you anywhere,' murmured Biggles dryly.

'That fellow's closing in. I believe he can still see us.'

'He's close enough to see our exhausts. Tell me when he gets within range. Maybe I can show him something.'

'How far are we from the frontier?'

'Ten miles She's taking all I can give her, so we ought to be across in two or three minutes.'

'Look out! He's shooting!' yelled Ginger suddenly.

The words had barely left his lips when the machine banked steeply and then plunged downward. He had to clutch at his seat to remain in it. He lost all sense of direction, and even the relative position of the machine with the ground. Hardened air traveller though he was, his stomach seemed to come up into his mouth.

Quivering, the machine returned to even keel.

'Gosh! If you do that again I shall be sick,' gasped Ginger, looking around for the searchlights in order to find out which way they were travelling. The lights were straight ahead, groping towards them.

'Van you see that fellow who was shooting at us?' asked Biggles.

'No — yes, there he is. The searchlights have just picked him up. He's miles above us.'

Ginger glanced again at the altimeter and saw that they were down to two thousand feet.

Half a dozen searchlights were now stabbing the air around them.

The noise of the engines died as Biggles cut the throttle. The machine banked vertically to the right and began gliding parallel with the line of lights. Looking back, Ginger saw that the beams had concentrated on the area they had just left. The sky was filled with crimson flashes, and he knew that the guns were in action.

The nose of the machine tilted down.

Ginger looked at Biggles. There was a curious smile on his face. He appeared to feel Ginger looking at him, for he glanced up and caught his eyes. 'This is like old times,' he said cheerfully.

With the machine still gliding Biggles began picking his way with uncanny skill through the beams. 'Tell everybody to hold on to something if a light picks us up,' he told Ginger.

if that happens I shall make a rush for it, but I may have to throw the

machine about a bit.

Ginger obeyed the order and returned to his seat. 'My goodness, we're low,' he said, looking down.

'When there are guns about, if you can't get high, keep low,' muttered Biggles. And at that moment a groping light swung round and caught their wing-tip. It overshot, but the operator had evidently seen them, for the beam swung swiftly back towards them.

The Lockheed's engines burst into a bellow of noise. The nose tilted down steeply.

Down — down — down.

Ginger held his breath, torn between looking at the jagged bursts of flame outside, and the air-speed indicator, the needle

of which had crept up over the three hundred mark. He flinched when something struck the machine with a harsh, tearing crash.

Biggles eased the stick back. Again the machine quivered as something struck it. 'Are the others all right?' he asked calmly.

Ginger peered down into the darkened cabin. 'Yes,' he said. 'The Professor's got his hands over his face. He looks frightened to death.'

'So do you,' grinned Biggles.

'You don't look so good yourself,' snorted Ginger, marvelling at the way Biggles threw such a big machine about, for it was never on the same course for more than a moment.

Looking around he saw that the lights were no longer in front of them. A black mass seemed to rise up on their left. 'What's that?' he cried in alarm.

'Only a mountain,' Biggles told him. 'I shot through a pass.' He brought the machine to even keel, but continued to bank steeply, first one way and then the other.

The lights are behind us,' said Ginger.

'Quite right,' replied Biggles. 'We've crossed the frontier. We are over France.'

`They are still shooting at us.'

`The French will soon be shooting at them if they don't pack up,' growled Biggles, sitting back in his seat and taking a deep breath. 'I think the worst is over,' he murmured.

Ginger put his head out of the side window. 'The lights are going out,' he said as he drew it in again. 'Where are you going to make for?'

Biggles tried the controls carefully and studied the instrument board before he replied. '

Croydon,' he said.

`Croydon!'

`Yes. I'm not landing anywhere this side of Dover if I can prevent it. When I step out of this machine I want to feel good English soil under my feet.'

`The same as you,' nodded Ginger. 'I've had all I want of the continent for a bit.'

`Take a message to the wireless operator.'

`Yes.'

`Tell him to call up Croydon control tower. He is to say that he has a message for X.I.I., Whitehall. The message is. "All's well. Meet us at Croydon about three." Sign it "

Bigglesworth". Got that?'

`Yes. Who is X.I.I.?'

`Colonel Raymond.'

Ì get it,' nodded Ginger, making his way aft.

Conclusion

That is really the end of the story of how Professor Beklinder was snatched from a position which might have had far-reaching effects at a critical time in British history. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that had Biggles and his two comrades failed in their quest, the result might have been disastrous, not only for the Professor personally, but for the British Empire.

Naturally, no word of the affair ever reached the newspapers beyond a belated and curiously worded denial that the Professor had been killed in a motor accident. Only those actively concerned with the rescue knew the truth of the rumours which subsequently leaked out both on the continent and in London.

The shell-torn Lockheed reached Croydon a few minutes after three o'clock in the morning. The passengers found two cars awaiting them. Colonel Raymond was there with two bowler-hatted gentlemen whom Ginger did not know.

Colonel Raymond made only one remark to Biggles as he stepped out of the machine, before turning to Professor Beklinder, with whom, naturally, he was more concerned at the moment. Smiling, he shook his head. 'Good work, Bigglesworth,' he said. 'How do you do it?'

Oh, just low cunning, with a bit of luck thrown in,' grinned Biggles wearily.

They all went in the two cars to a famous London hotel where Colonel Raymond had arranged for the Professor to stay pending a secret inquiry into the whole affair.

They all got out.

I expect you fellows want to get home,' said Colonel Raymond, looking at Biggles, Algy, and Ginger in turn.

'That sounds a good idea to me,' admitted Biggles. 'I shall be available if you want me. I'

ll send you a long report in due course.'

'Good,' nodded the Colonel 'James, my chauffeur, can drive you home. He knows where you live.'

'Thanks Good night, sir. Good night, Professor; we'll have lunch together one day in the near future and congratulate ourselves.' Turning, Biggles got into the car with the others.

He slammed the door. 'Home, James — and don't spare the horses,' he said, yawning.

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